

What Hath God Wrought

Craig A. Eddy



Book I of
The Unholy Wars of Home

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by
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is

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Chapter 1

Finding the Victim

(Friday afternoon)

She came in and sat down like she was mad at the world. Or felt guilty about something. That angry slouch and graceless drop into the chair that only young teens can affect well. It must be something instinctive that they all seem to perform it the same way. She certainly had it down pat. It looked like she'd studied it a lot, and was ready to argue with him or ignore him, depending on what he said.

The room didn't lend itself to helping her mood. Institutional would be the kindest description of it. Also small, dingy, grubby, and looking like an interrogation room out of a cheap cop movie.

"As you know," he said, "I'm only here for a short time. I'm just filling in for your regular teacher. In fact, I shouldn't be here, but the school board asked me to step in and see if I could find out why the school does so poorly."

"You are not the reason," he continued. "At most, you're a symptom. A victim, if you will, of the situation that's become this school. I don't like victims. I think they're unnecessary. I don't think you like being a victim, either. You're a victim of many things starting with your age. You're not alone. We all are victims of our age, boys and girls alike. Even adults are. There are ways to overcome it that aren't just outgrowing it, since that never really works. The way to overcome it sounds simple. Become confident in yourself. It isn't simple, but it works. You're also a victim of poor instruction. Things are being thrown at you and you're supposed to remember them and recite them back. The problem with this is that you have nothing to connect them to. No experience – no reference points – no clue as to how the whole thing goes together, and it does. I may have a way to help you with both."

"Now for the bombshell. My name is Ted. Not 'Mister Ted' as the school would have you believe. Just Ted." He reached in a suit-coat pocket that wasn't there and pulled out a small book, placing it in front of her. Her eyes bugged out when she saw him do it. Slowly, she picked it up and looked at the cover. "This is who I am," he added, and motioned for her to go ahead and look.

It was a passport. A passport with a green cover and a strange emblem on the front. It also said 'Diplomat' on it. She picked it up and opened it, reading where he was from and what his reason for being in the country was. "You're THAT Ted? The guy that's the head of the Envoy Embassy?"

"Good. You're fast. And you understand."

"The heck I do!" she replied. "What's an ambassador doing as a substitute teacher in an elementary school?"



“Trying to find out why this is the worst school in the school system, and figure out how to correct it, mostly. But also looking for bright, young people that can learn, once they're taught how to learn and learn easily. Once they're taught that learning can be fun, that is. Are you one of those people?”

“No,” she said, putting the passport down. “I'm not smart. That's why you called me in, wasn't it? Because I got a bad score on the test?”

“Well, I'll admit that that had something to do with it,” he said. He made as if to pick something out of the air in front of him, and the passport disappeared from the table and was in his fingers. He quietly slid it back into the pocket that wasn't there.

::Matt,:: Ted sent, mentally. ::Do we have any female Envoys that can go on extended duty? I need a protector, but she's got to be able to pretend to be a 12 or 13 year old girl.::

::No problem, Ted.::

“How'd you do that? How'd you pick it up without touching it. And where'd you put it?”

“What? This?” he asked, taking the passport back out. “Oh, I just tell it where I want it to be.”

“Yea, right. Tell me another one.”

“OK, I will. You can do it, too, you know. You just have to learn how.” The door opened and a young girl walked in, wearing a light gray uniform. A very distinctive uniform of tunic and pants that were somewhat severe looking. A uniform that marked her as being one of those people from that Embassy across town

“Hi, Ted. Hi, my name is Matt . . uh.” The last was said with a bit of confusion but aimed at Ted's victim.

"Hi, Mata, I'm Muriel," the victim said without drawing out the syllables. "You're one of those Envoys, aren't you?"

"Ted was right. You're quick. Ted thought that there might be times when someone your age could help more than he could. So he asked me if I'd mind. Mind??!! I mean, getting out of the Enclave and actually seeing some of the world? Are you kidding? So I thought I'd better get right over here and introduce myself before he forgot or gave the job to somebody else. So, what's he got you working on right now?"

"How to pick pockets," Ted said with a straight face.

"What?" Mata almost shouted. Then snickered. "Oh, the passport trick. Any luck, yet?"

::Matt-uh, huh. Nice save.::

::Shush, you. I'm trying to get her jollied down. I take it you want me to help teach her the trick?:

"No luck yet, we just started. I think I peaked her interest a bit." ::Yea, if you can think of a way to:: "How about it, Muriel, would you like to see how it's done?"

"Isn't it something that only Envoys can do?" she asked.

"I don't think so, since, technically, I'm not an Envoy. I'm human. It's just a different way of seeing and understanding the world around you. And dealing with it."

"You're not an Envoy? But I thought everybody in the Envoy Enclave was one?"

"Oh, no. Not even close. We hire a lot of humans to do jobs in there. Mind stores. Do design work for buildings and such. All sorts of things. You'll see, when you come out to the Enclave. No, I just happen to be the one they felt would be best to interface with the people of your country, to act as an ambassador if you will."

::Mind link. I think it's the only way:: Mata pushed to Ted's mind. ::She needs to see how it's done before she can do it. Besides, if she knows that she can talk to me, mentally, then she's more apt to call me for help if she gets in trouble.::

::You'd have to ask her. I don't have a problem with it if she approves.::

"What did you mean by a different way of seeing the world?" Muriel asked.

::BINGO!::

"I can show you," Mata replied, "but it takes your permission. I can show you through my eyes how I see it. How Ted sees it. Then I can monitor while you try it, and show you how

it's done. But it means setting up a link between our minds. Nothing private. But people are touchy about things involving the mind. I can't show you unless you say you want to do it."

"Um . . ."

"Ted," Mata said, "take a walk." He didn't even hesitate. He simply stood up, turned and took one step forward and wasn't there.

"OK, now we're private. Does that make it easier to talk?"

"How'd he do that?" Muriel asked.

"That's more advanced training. Get through the first few things, and I'll show you how. But first you have to know how we see the world around us. I think I know what's troubling you," Mata continued. "You're afraid that I'm going to see something in your mind that would be embarrassing to you, or that would make me think less of you. Or that Ted would find out something and decide that you weren't the right person to train and trust. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"Ted is human. He understands that humans make mistakes. Humans have private thoughts that they don't want others to know about. Humans do things that they are ashamed of. He's not like some all-powerful being that's going to punish people for breaking rules that they don't even know about, or even those that they DO know about. He believes that, with training, people can improve themselves. And more, forgive themselves."

"As for Envoys, we don't have gender. Most of the Envoys look like guys, but the reality is that they are neutral. We were created - or found, we're not sure which - by a male-centric jerk that didn't even know what being male meant. He set up impossible laws for people and told them they were lower than us. He was wrong. You . . . you humans. . . gain more experience in a few short years than we do through all our lives. As a result, we don't judge people. We can't, for the most part. We don't have the experience to hang a judgment on. In some ways we're more innocent than you are. It's one of the things that Ted wants to fix. He wants to get Envoys to be more like people and get people to be more like Envoys. So, he's looking for bridges. He's looking for people like you that can learn the things that Envoys do - that Ted does. By sharing with me you can help me understand people better, and get closer to being one."

"How . . . how old are you?" Muriel asked.

"About 600 million, as close as we can figure. We don't die. Well, actually, neither do you in the normal course of things. Oh, bodies die. But the soul doesn't. It just goes Home. A rest, maybe some training, a choice as to whether they want to come back here . . ."

"I have . . . well had a friend," Muriel said. "She was in an accident. She died . . ."

"What was her name?"

"Loretta. We called her 'Lotta', because she was always in a lotta trouble," Muriel said with a sad smile.

"She's there," Mata said, after a short, thoughtful pause. "When you've learned enough to make the transfer, you can go visit her. She's in training, and wants to come back some day."

"What about Ted?"

"He won't judge you," Mata replied. "He'll help guide your training, may even do some teaching himself. But he understands that people are people. He doesn't expect you to be perfect. Just good at what you do and willing to do it."

Muriel thought for a couple of minutes. Then said, "How long will Ted stay away?"

"Until I call him."

"OK. How do I link to you?"

"Well, the easiest way is for me to make the link . . . oh. YOU want to do it. Rrrr. I'm going to kill that man! OK, look, I'll try to talk you through it. But I'm not sure it will work that way. You don't have the experience."

"Then you'll have to try harder. If all else fails I'll let you make the link. But I'd really rather make it myself, if I can. That way there's no question that I entered into it willingly."

Mata looked angry, then determined, then looked up and said, "I sometimes wish he'd left things as a religion. Oh, well. He did say it wasn't going to be easy on me when I offered to help with your training. So, here it goes. Close your eyes. Reach out to me as if I were a door, and knock, and I'll let you in."

Muriel closed her eyes. A couple of seconds later the most amazed expression blossomed on her face and she started crying.

::Ted! You'd better get back here, like NOW!:: Mata mentally sent.

Chapter 2

Training Begins (Friday afternoon)

Ted walked back into the room the same way he'd left – one moment he wasn't there, the next he was stepping to his chair and sitting down.

“OK, Mata, tell me what happened.” He made it sound like a command.

“I think Muriel should be the one to tell you.” Ted turned to the still crying girl with the strange look on her face.

“I . . . I linked to Mata.”

“Good. Then we can go to the next stage and . . .” Muriel interrupted him.

“You don't understand.” There was a knock on Ted's mind, then, ::I linked to Mata. I did it, not her:: The look on Ted's face when she requested permission to link was worth all the hassle that Mata had gone through trying to teach her how to do it.

“She's a jump ahead of you, Ted. Now I need your help to calm her down, or her parents are going to think the worst about you. Child abuser!”

Ted reached out, mentally, and wrapped Muriel in imaginary arms, and wasn't surprised to find that Mata's were already there. “You did good. Both of you. Mata, I'm sorry I got you into something that so frustrates you. But only a little sorry. You wanted to know what humans were like, and wanted to work with Muriel. Well, she's even surprised me, and I'm known for being frustrating to work with. But it goes to show that we made the right choice. She's quick. And, like most kids, when she sees a reason to do something, she's even quicker. Can you hang on and keep working with her? At least for a while?”

“I'm in for the long haul,” She replied, with a sigh. “I won't rely on her being able to be this quick all the time. But now that I know she can be, well, I can be flexible.”

“OK. Can you put a detail on her until we can get her protected from State? I think we should stop for today, and set up the tutoring dodge with her parents for tomorrow.”

“Ted, I'll personally stay with her until she's covered. The squads, all four of them, will only be a step away. But how does State come into this?”

“Oh, that's right. You weren't part of the discussion with the government when we applied for visas to enter the country and set up the enclaves. The Department of State was a little put out that we didn't have a known location that they could bomb.” He snickered. “He got out-voted by the President and Congress – first time THEY'VE ever worked together –

and pressured into granting the visas and diplomatic status. Well, when he found out that we were going to train humans in Envoy techniques he tried to pad the list of people we could choose from with his own pet war-mongers. I went down through the list and declared that all of them were unfit to train. Now, if he finds out that we ARE training someone, he's going to want to grab her and find out what she knows and try to apply it himself. It won't work, of course, but there's no need to subject Muriel to that character and his methods. So, if he tries, I want her and her parents pulled into the Enclave as fast as possible, no matter where they are, and I want his people bottled up until law enforcement can arrive and arrest them."

"No sweat," Mata said. "Each team is currently 4 people plus me. If 17 Envoys can't get them out, then we start a war. And we've got a long list of other Envoys that would love to join the squads. So, tomorrow's to-do list is to get her solid with a source of power, and get her to see people the way we do, manipulate objects, and move herself?"

"Yea, that's what I see," Ted responded. "If she can take it that fast, and subject to change, as needed. Muriel, you might have a headache tonight from using mental muscle that hasn't been used before. Let Mata sooth it away. Tomorrow you definitely will. Thank goodness it's on a Saturday. Oh, make it 5 man teams, Mata. I want each to have their own leader. You're simply Officer In Charge. You can overrule the leaders. But, by the same token, they can vary from orders due to circumstances. Can you live with that?"

"Yea, sure. But why?"

"Because your first and best job is to be Muriel's friend, trainer as necessary, confidant, and second line of defense. She'll have to be the first line of defense, herself, once she can manage it. Back to State," Ted said. "The guy's a jerk. But he really thinks he's doing things for the best of his country, so far as I can tell. So, I want to side-step him. I want Muriel trained as fast as possible so that we can declare her as an 'adopted' citizen of Home, and give her diplomatic status as an ambassador for Home."

"Muriel, I'm sorry," Ted made a disgusted face about himself. "We're talking over your head, talking about you, and that's not right. You have rights in this, too. You can tell us off and say you don't want to be a part of it."

"Are you kidding?" she interrupted. "I wouldn't stop this for anything. And you're talking about making me an ambassador? How is that possible?"

"Very carefully," he said, ironically. "It'll be a juggling match. Oh, and by the way, you can chime in at any time if you see any problems or possible solutions to problems we see. Questions and suggestions are very welcome, especially since they affect you."

"OK," Muriel said, gathering her courage, "where are we going to do the training? School is closed on Saturday. Do it at home and you'll have my parents, or at least my mother, all over us trying to figure out what we're doing and interfering. Nothing will get done."

"Oh, sorry. I just presumed you knew. We'll take you to the Enclave to train you. State

can't *officially* enter without permission, unless he wants to start a full-blown diplomatic incident. Once you're granted diplomatic status, we can even bring your parents in if they get threatened. I'm sure the number of Envoys we've got in the Enclave can find a way to keep them busy." He smiled with that. Enclave had been an open Embassy from the beginning, predicated on the idea that they really had no secrets, and wanted to share with their 'new friends'. "Hmm. How to get you there. I think the Embassy car would be best. We could even bring your parents, and separate you from them when you arrive. Mata?"

"No problem. Hold on a sec." She looked thoughtful for a second, then turned back to Ted. "Second and third squad are practicing being kids her age right now. They've already filled out to five with a leader chosen. So there'll be 10 kids mobbing her as soon as she gets out of the car, all in appropriate "kid" clothes. Oh, and it'll be boys and girls with the "traditional" goofing and pushing you'd expect from kids. Squad 4 will act like sufficiently pompous dignitaries, well, not too much with the pompous, to keep her parents occupied. We might even tap them for whatever problems they are having in life, that someone could use as weaknesses against them."

"What's first squad doing?" Ted asked.

"Thinking up ways to look like a military escort. Two cars, I think. Lead car with squad one, followed by the Embassy car. The Limo. That way they can form an honor guard at the limo's door. Formal invitation? Can we get one out in time? And can we run lights?"

"Lights are out. It would take too long to set up with law enforcement to run a motorcade. The rest sounds good. Military? Uniforms?"

"just the normal grays. Ted, we decided this way back when you took over. Envoys don't rate rank. The only ones that show rank are you and anyone we manage to train, here. We DON'T want the mistake of your predecessor, making it look like we were higher than real people. We never were, except in his mind. Oh, we'll accept leadership positions between ourselves. Even swap them around to get a 'best fit'. But we don't rank people. Period."

"Muriel," Mata said, turning to the girl, "are you up to one more training session? It won't be as long or as difficult. But it will provide a first line of defense for you. You see, we can see souls. And the color of the soul can tell you if somebody is up to no good. That was the purpose in setting up the link to begin with. I'll show you what I see when I look at you by letting you see through my eyes. Then we'll reverse it and I'll look through yours and show you how to do it. The rest is just practice, and you'll get a chance to do that tomorrow. OK?"

"Um," Muriel hesitated, "can you cure a headache? 'Cause I've got one now, and if I do more it's gonna get worse, isn't it?"

"Oh, GEEZ! I'm sorry. You're power's down. Hold still a minute. There. Better?"

"Yea," Muriel said with relief. "OK, what do I do?"

"Just close your eyes. I'll push what I see to you and show you what you and your soul

look like. See it? That gray at your core and kinda radiating out around you? That's your soul. And don't be upset by the color. It just shows that you're human and make mistakes, and haven't fully gotten over the guilt feelings about them. We can work on some of that later, if you like. But it's nothing to worry about. Black would indicate enemy. Somebody that is out to destroy Home or humans or both. Red would indicate aggression or attack. White would indicate someone that doesn't know what guilt is. Most people will show up as gray. OK?"

"Yea. I see it. Gad, I look a mess right now. What will my parents think?"

"That I just read you the riot act about your grades," Ted chimed in. "Don't worry about it. We'll fix you up some before you go home."

"OK," Mata said, "Now I want you to open your eyes and look at me. Here's how you do it: just kinda unfocus your eyes a bit. See it?"

"Yea. Yours is white. Only it's brighter than mine."

"Not really. It looks brighter because it's not being masked by a physical body. Envoys are soul without a body. We just make it look like we've got one."

"But, I've touched you. You're physical!"

"Not really. We just appear to be. Now, look at Ted."

"Oh! Gray, but somehow darker and brighter at the same time."

"Yea," he said, "I've got some unresolved issues. I'm also human. The brightness comes from the power that I handle. Yours will sparkle like that after a few sessions. How about it, Mata. Enough for now?"

"Yes. We need to get her home and make the invitation."

As they walked out, Muriel turned to Mata. "What gives. Sometimes Ted seems to be in charge, and sometimes you do," she said.

"Ted's in charge. Always. He's the boss. He's the final arbitrator. But . . . well . . . he doesn't pretend to know everything or always have the best ideas, so he asks for input. Even if he thinks he DOES know everything about something, if someone makes a suggestion or questions him he'll honestly consider it. He also believes in giving people the authority to back up their responsibility. And believe me, that's non-standard for a boss. He expects that, if we have questions about how to do something, we'll ask. He'll either give us an answer or a discussion to find an answer. But once it's decided we'll do something, he might make suggestions, but he won't tell us how to do it UNLESS we ask. As a result, things might not always go the way he expected they would, but they pretty much come out all right. I guess the reason is that, when dealing with humans, there's no predicting how they will react, so situations change moment to moment. It keeps us on our toes, I'll tell you that. And it's fun, in a way. Certainly challenging."

"Oh," Mata went on, "he also doesn't mine bantering. My kidding him about killing him. He knew it was frustration with my suddenly being faced with more than I expected, and didn't take it seriously. He really is good like that. Of course, he teases back. You'll find that he treats you like an equal. That's the way he is. But it's a strange equality. To him, you're a person – an adult that just doesn't have as much experience as he does, maybe. A person that has different likes and dislikes, and a much different personality."

"There's something you should know. About me . . . us . . . Envoys, that is," Mata added.

"You mean that you're actually a guy pretending to be a girl?" Muriel snickered.

"Um . . . you knew?"

"Matt . . . uh? Really? And you said that Envoys were originally all male because of your male-centric leader. So, Matt . . . or is it Matthew? How do you like being a girl?"

"You little minx!" Mata sputtered. Ted just snickered. "Ted, your neck is back on the chopping block!" Ted just laughed. "Alright. I never really was a guy. I just looked like one. The few times any of us looked like females it was always perfect, unapproachable females. This . . . this is strange. I'm having to learn how to be a person, and all I've got as a guide is one over-age teenage male, and a very unorthodox, immature female. And it's frustrating. But I'll get it. I was Matthew, but Ted shortened it to Matt when we first met. It took me a while to understand about nicknames. We threw this operation together in a hurry when he realized that you might be trainable, and I didn't think it through. So I bungled the name, and you took it and ran with it. So, now I'm Mata. Minx. Beast." By now even Muriel was laughing. But she could tell that she wasn't hurting Mata's feelings by doing so.

"I did tell you she was quick. Keeps her own counsel, too. Mata, I've got good feelings about this," Ted said. "Give her a year, and she could take over my job. She listens. She learns. She knows how to ask good questions and make good suggestions. And she wants to try. And you make a good second to her. You're an organizer, and you're loose enough to allow circumstances to work themselves out. With your attention to detail and her inventiveness, well, I feel sorry for the human race. They won't know what hit them."

"OK, we're getting close to her home. I'm going to switch to an adult female, so it looks like she's been chaperoned while at school. No indecencies. The car's coming to pick us up. When we leave, I'll get in the car with you, then disappear and take up guard on Muriel. A squad is already there, just invisible. So, we're covered for tonight. Hopefully, by the end of tomorrow we'll have better protections in place. I just hope you know what you're doing. I don't think I've ever heard of a citizen becoming a diplomat for a foreign nation."

"Yea, well I'll probably 'back door' it. Pass the idea to the President, and let him issue orders. We'll get it. Hopefully in time. I couldn't start until I had a name and particulars to fill in the blanks."

Chapter 3

The Trip to the Enclave (Saturday morning)

The car move up the street in a stately manner followed closely by the SUV chase car with the squad in it. Had Muriel's parents actually seen the vehicles arrive, they would have been shocked, as they simply appeared on the street just out of view of the house and proceeded from there. The invitation had been met with awe – the ambassador of a foreign nation bringing their child home and inviting them to come visit the Enclave? Of course they would be happy to come. And he's providing a car to bring them? Who could resist being treated like royalty. They were so engaged in talking about it, what they would see, what to wear, that they never noticed the sometimes indulgent sometimes “bite her tongue” looks on their daughter's face.

It had been squads 2 and 3 that had actually been picked to guard Muriel and escort the limo. They had spent part of the night meeting Muriel mentally and getting a taste of what she was like. The results were that it was a good thing Mata could support her and provide both mental soothing for headaches and power to keep her going. It had been a LONG night for everyone involved, but the squads were as excited as kids about the part they would play. It was all that Mata could do to keep a lid on them. In fact, it was a good thing that they would be playing the part of kids her age, since they were acting like it. Squad 1, since they would find themselves “in charge” of Muriel's parents, were busy trying to put on dignity, but it was much like putting on strange clothes that didn't quite fit.

Squad 4 which, with the change in assignments found themselves without one, decided that it wasn't right for the others to have all the fun, opted to become “trainers”, the adults that would “teach” Muriel the courses that she was having trouble with in school. Math, science, history (American and Home), music and philosophy (even though philosophy wasn't taught at that level). The training would simply be by mental dump to her and take little time and no strain. It was also decided that the squads would make the links, saving the strain of that being put on Muriel. As a result three of the four squads would be “introduced” to Muriel and have mental links to her. The fourth squad would be introduced to her just before lunch when Ted would gather up her parents. It was hoped that by that time the actual training Muriel was to receive could be accomplished and she could be accredited as a Home diplomat.

Cats, Mata muttered to herself. Cats would be easier. Even kittens would be easier. Mata couldn't remember a time when Envoys had been so excited and excitable in all the time she's been in existence. She, with dignity, completely ignored the fact that she was as excited and excitable as the squads were. This was going to be fun on a grand scale. A lot of work, yes, and a lot of play-acting that wouldn't hurt anyone and would serve as good public relations on the news.

::OK, let's get focused, people. We're here. Muriel, you ready?: Mata sent.

::Just getting my parents:: “Mom, dad, I think we should move out to the porch and wait for them.”

“Oh! Is it that time already?” her mother asked, as she checked the clock for the tenth time in eleven minutes. “Dear, are you sure that's what you should wear. I mean, it looks kinda grubby.”

Muriel smiled, “Yes, mom. I know for fact that I'm going to be meeting a bunch of kids before I go to the tutors. Also, if there's something formal that I need to dress up for, they'll provide it for me. But I can't think of anything that I'd need to be formal for. Relax, it's all going to be great. You'll see. Dad? Are you ready?”

“But . . . but I don't even know how to behave. Should I bow or something? What do I say? Oh, I just know I'll make a fool of myself.” Her father looked half dazed.

“Dad, he's human. And he doesn't believe in a lot of fancy protocol. Just be you, don't try to put on something you're not. You're my father, and he wants me to do something for him. That makes you the one in charge, kinda. You know? Besides, he kids with his people and listens to them when they have suggestions or questions. Now look, all we have to do is be on the porch. He'll come up to meet us, then escort us to his car and we'll be on our way. Nothing to it.”

“If you say so,” he replied, doubtfully, as she managed to finally usher them out the door. She did have to remind her father to lock the door. Then they turned and there he was – Ted, head of a foreign nation, ambassador to earth, stepping from a green limousine and walking up the walk toward them. Muriel felt Mata go past her and duck into the car. Then Ted was there, on the porch with them.

“Mom, dad, this is Ted, the leader of the Home delegation of Envoys. Ted, my parents.”

“What am I supposed to say?” her father muttered. “I mean, he's an important person . . . “

“Hi usually works. I don't believe in all the pomp and ceremony. I'm not like one of those self-important people that can just arbitrarily tell the head of his security detail to stand on his head and expect it to be done,” Ted said, warmly, while shaking her father's hand. Then he noticed Muriel trying not to laugh, turned and saw what she was laughing at. The head of the security detail lined up at the door was quietly standing on his head in a perfect example of an upside-down attitude of attention.

“You know,” he said, covering his eyes with his hand, “if I didn't know better, I'd be inclined to think that your daughter had a hand in this. The reason I know she didn't is they're always pulling this kind of stuff if they think I'm getting too stuffy.” By this time, her parents were laughing, too. Muriel wasn't sure who had actually decided it was a good idea, but it broke the ice. Her parents were no longer as up-tight about the situation as they had been. “I

should just leave him that way.” The stern expression he was trying to give the squad leader failed, miserably, as Ted broke out in laughter, too. “OK, imp. Let’s pretend this is a decorous occasion, and behave yourself.” The squad leader promptly raised an inch off the ground and rotated to an upright position, then settled back onto the ground.

“Better,” Ted muttered, as he led Muriel and her parents to the car. They were still giggling as they entered and noticed an adult Mata sitting at the front with her back to the driver.

“Mr. and Mrs. White, welcome,” she said. “As you know, today is mostly to help your daughter catch up with her classes in school. So, for most of the day, she won’t be with you. I’m one of the instructors that will be helping her. I would ask that you be patient and understanding of her, for it’s going to be a long day for her. In the mean time, there is all of Enclave to show you, and we have a detail of Envoys to escort you around and answer questions. We’ve tried to tell them not to be stuffy. But this is as strange to them as it is to you. We haven’t had very many visitors, and part of this is to show that we actually encourage people to come out and get to know us. As you see Enclave and ask questions, the detail will be asking you questions, too. What may seem commonplace to you may be completely unknown to them, and it will help us a lot to know more about humans, so we can make such an experience more attractive and comfortable to you.”

“Muriel,” she added, “I’m glad to see you took the suggestion to dress comfortably. You’re going to be mobbed by about 10 kids as soon as you show up. They don’t get a chance to meet outsiders much, and kids their age not at all. They’ve all promised to be on their best behavior, which means about as much as kittens being on their best behavior. But they’ll stay with you during your tutoring, and may help you over some of the rough spots.”

All this was done slowly and with good humor, which kept Muriel’s parents from noticing that the trip to Enclave was amazingly short. The cars had taken a shortcut through another dimension and now turned into the entrance to the Enclave. Ahead, a delegation of Envoys waited patiently. The car stopped, doors opened, Ted was the first out and assisted the others to leave the vehicle. Mata disappeared.

As Ted led Muriel’s parents to the delegation, a young girl slid out from behind the Envoys and walked toward Muriel. Though similar in dress, the blouse the girl was wearing was much more muted than Muriel’s. They hugged then walked away from the delegation, Muriel’s parents, and the car. Shortly, in ones and twos, other children joined them, introducing themselves, until finally two squads ringed her, connected by mental links to her and to each other, giggling, goofing, and in general acting like 12 year olds. Some of their goofing was a bit . . . rude? Vulgar? Well, let’s just say that it wasn’t for polite society and especially not for parents.

But behind that goofing was a solid wall of love and protection. These were people that would be willing to die to protect her. It was like being surrounded by very friendly, loving tigers and panthers. And the feeling of awe that Muriel felt was overwhelming. They guided her down a side street in the Enclave – It was the first time she realized just how big the Enclave was – toward what looked like a warehouse building.

::Muriel,:: one of them sent, ::we want to get you to the point where you can protect yourself as quickly as possible. So there will only be 2 tutoring sessions this morning. You'll get them just before lunch. They only take about 5 minutes each, and you shouldn't think about them until they settle. The rest will be just before you go home. The first thing we'll teach you is how to find your power and tap it,:: the mental voice continued. ::That will reduce the possibility of headaches, though we're always available to help reduce them if they do happen. After that, we'll teach you how to put up shields and seek and find objects and make things. I think you'll enjoy the last,:: he, and it was obviously a he, sent, ::though not all of us will be with you for that. The girls have insisted,:: and he chuckled.

They walked into the building, which looked stark and unfinished, and on into one room that seemed particularly dead. ::This room is soundproofed. There's a reason for that. Once you've learned to create shields you'll find out why. All of this area will eventually be your office, and will be rebuilt to suit your interests. That doesn't mean that you'll be stuck in here all the time. But it does mean that you'll have a place to decompress from the stress you may experience. Don't worry, your welfare means everything to us. Shall we get started?::

What happened after that was a wild concoction of learning and goofing. It was long and grueling, but entirely successful. Her trainers didn't believe in failure, so when she didn't succeed immediately, they found other ways to reach her, to show her what needed to be done. Envoys, themselves, hadn't known about tapping power and using it, since they were by their nature already attached to it. It had taken Ted to explain to them how it was done. But once that was successful the rest was easier because it was things they did, themselves.

Learning how to shield went from fumbling attempts that almost worked to success in less than 15 minutes. And another 5 made them instinctive and self-perpetuating. Then she found out why the room was soundproofed. They shot her. One whole squad pulled out handguns and fire at less than 10 foot distance. The bullets never touched her. Nor were they squashed like they would have been if they had hit something. They simply stopped in mid-air. She reached out to them and plucked them out of the air and stared, disbelieving, at the .45 caliber slugs that had been aimed at her heart.

::Now, you're protected. With those shields you can't be shot, knifed, gassed, or even grabbed against your will. We'll still be your squads and do our best to make sure that you never need them. But having them takes a heavy load off of us. Like the difference between desperate and merely dangerous.:: That last was followed with a smile from one of the quietest of the Envoys. ::Now, the fun begins.::

And the next stage began. Finding objects and bringing them back: a ring, a coat, the picture of a kitten, other things until she felt comfortable with it. All except the coat she pulled from a hidden pocket. The coat she pulled out of the back of one of the male Envoys, to the amusement of the girls who thought she should have pulled it out of someplace lower. Then she started looking for people, monitored by one of the Envoys – usually Mata – to be sure she got the right one.

Then, the “boys” were ushered out, complaining all the way that they could just turn

into girls and stay. And the secret of the Envoy uniforms was explained. Envoys, and Ted, could change clothes instantly, to anything they wanted to wear. They could do it because they didn't have to take clothes off and put them on, but just created them at need. The girls took turns demonstrating by flicking in and out of various costumes. Some of them outrageous, like the bikini that would have caused a heart attack in a corpse. Then they switched to the gray uniforms that Envoys wore outside the Enclave (and sometimes inside the Enclave depending on what they were doing). Muriel studied the uniforms, how they were shaped, how the pants stayed up, what protection there was for sensitive parts of a girl, fit and form, then tried her first fumbling attempts to create one. They weren't very successful at first, except for the one that caused some significant laughter and kidding about how the boys would like to see her without a seat to her pants. But finally she succeeded.

Then she built on that success. She remodeled them slightly to better conform to a girl's figure, making them distinctive from the boy's version. That brought oohs and ahs from the surrounding girls, who immediately made changes to their own to match.

::Muriel,:: Mata sent, getting her attention, ::It's almost time for lunch. So we'll go out to the teachers and have them give you the first 2 doses. This is like the hypnotic teaching that humans tried years ago. They weren't successful, really, because they couldn't include the detail that we can, and they couldn't work directly with a mind. All you have to do is let your mind go blank. Don't try to think about what's coming in. It will only slow them down. It'll all be over in 10 minutes or so, and the information will be there when you need it. They opened the door and went out, to the applause of all the assembled boys, now men. Two of them stood by what looked like a dentist's chair, but was much more comfortable. She sat down, relaxed, and stared at a blank spot on the wall. Ten minutes later she was told to get up, she was done. There was no pain, but there was a bit of a thick feeling to her mind, like it was carrying a heavy weight.

The girls had turned into women, and the new styling of the uniforms definitely showed that they were women. Very motherly tigresses, which meant dangerous as a nuclear bomb and protective as the most dangerous predator alive – human women.

::We'd like you to wear your uniform to lunch. It'll show Ted that you've passed the first level successfully. It's why we held that last. Well, part of the reason. You couldn't have done it without all the rest, first. It'll also show your parents that you belong here as much as you belong with them. We'll reinforce that by going with you, in squads. Your fourth squad is currently doing diplomatic service with your parents, but they'll join us as soon as we show up. You lead. We'll follow in squads. I'll be with you to give you directions if you need them.::

"Wait," she stopped, "what about my hair?" She made a sweeping motion in front of her, as she'd seen one of them do when she was trying to create her uniform. One of the others moved up beside her. "We'll worry about style later. For now, this should do," and what had simply been hair shaped hair turned into a smooth shoulder length mass that moved with her without moving out of place. "Now, we really need to go. There are others that want to say hi to you, too."

Muriel didn't have long to wait to understand what was meant. Outside the building the

street was lined four deep on each side with Envoys. As she stepped out ahead of her squads cheering erupted in a wave of sound that rivaled the gunshots in the soundproofed room. Mata was right. She didn't need directions to find where lunch was being held. She couldn't have made a wrong turn if she'd tried. They blocked intersections and driveways, and completely dominated the sidewalks. And they cheered and waved. After the first shock, Muriel waved back. Mata dropped back behind her so that no one's view was blocked of the one who dared to learn from them.

Chapter 4

Lunch, Shock, and Awe (Saturday noon)

Ted, Muriel's parents, and the 'dignitaries' had just set down when the noise started. A wave of sound, shouting and cheering that kept moving closer. The 'dignitaries', actually the fourth of Muriel's security squads, excused themselves and walked outside and formed up 2 deep, 2 wide and the leader in front.

"I think your wayward daughter is coming," Ted told her parents. "You might want to see this." They stood up and went to the doorway just as the sound reached its peak. Hundreds of Envoys were waving and cheering all around. One squad was formed up to leave room for the other three. And there they came, led by what was unmistakably Muriel, but one like no one had ever seen before. She turned to face the dining room, and moved forward just enough for her squads to form up behind her, then stopped to give them time. Then move forward with a new-found confidence toward her parents. It would have been hard to tell who was more shocked – Ted or Muriel's parents.

"Mom, dad. You've met Mata, she was in the car with you. Behind me are the four squads of my security detail. I'm told that I don't really need them anymore because of some of the things I've just learned. But it would hurt me and them to tell them so. Probably me more than them. They fight dirty." She smiled to show that it was a joke. Ted quietly thought that it wasn't. "Any time I'm out side of the Enclave there will be at least one squad with me. You might not see them, but they'll be there. They took turns protecting the house last night. And yes, I'm still very much your daughter, and will be staying at home unless you want me to leave."

"Want you to leave?" her mother sputtered. "Why would we want you to leave? But how will we put them up and feed them?"

"They're Envoys, mom. They're not human. They don't need to eat or sleep. And for some reason they seem to be devoted to me. They're not guests that need to be entertained. They won't cause any trouble or attract attention. The only reason I showed them to you is to show that you don't have to worry about my going out any more."

"People still have guns, you know," her father said.

Muriel reached in a pocket that wasn't there and pulled something out, transferring it to her father's hand. When he looked, he could see 5 .45 caliber full metal jacket slugs with rifling marks on them. "The last test before they taught me how to get my uniform was to shoot me. Those were aimed at my heart. They didn't get within a foot of me. Individually, each of the Envoy can put up a shield stronger than I can right now. And you can bet that if I were in danger there would be 5 shields around me. Or more. Envoys can move fast. Oh, by the way, the Envoys aren't wasteful, either. I didn't know it but Mata had another shield

behind mine that would have stopped a tank traveling at the same speed as those slugs. They wouldn't have let me loose until I HAD passed that test. The Envoys want me to have a long and happy life. I don't know why, but they like me. And I like them. And I'm getting a handle on what it is that they want me to do. They want me to train more people. They also want to learn about people from me. There was something said about being a bridge, but I just can't see me in steel and concrete."

Ted about choked on her last statement. But the effect on her father was better. He relaxed some. Then even more when Muriel hugged him, then hugged her mother. "Would you like to explain what happened to your uniform?" Ted asked.

"Sure. You designed them for a boy. Or at least a guy. I'm not one." And that saucy line was all he could get out of her. It took Mata to explain to him that girls go out where boys don't, and don't go out where boys do. He decided that it would be better if he never brought up the subject again.

Instead, he backpedaled and tried to make it look like this was what he meant all the time: "What's that on your sleeve?" Muriel looked down, puzzled. Then saw the stripe on her sleeve, like liquid silver that couldn't be brushed off. "The Envoys have their own criteria. I've never taken the time to really work it out. They simply gave me 4 of them when I showed up. Of course, I'd done a few things when I showed up that kinda made me stand out. You, on the other hand, they test. Basic got you the right to the uniform whenever you want. I would hazard a guess that being able to protect yourself was at least part of the reason they told me you needed a stripe on your sleeve. Oh, and like mine, it's not just the sleeve but the collar and the officer's stripe on the outside seam of your pants. Get used to it. They tell us that we run the place. But you see who actually calls the shots." Then he grinned.

As they walked into the dining room, Muriel's mother quietly asked, "should you really talk that way to him?"

"Yes," said Ted, ten feet ahead and out of normal hearing range. "She should. Mrs. White, I'm human. I make mistakes. So will your daughter. But putting me down when I'm wrong, and in such a humorous way, is definitely not out of line. She's right. I didn't design the uniforms to account for women or girls. I just created what was comfortable to me. I expect that, now that she's shown them how, any of the Envoys that choose to be female will adopt the style. They're certainly welcome to," he added, holding Mrs. White's chair for her. "In fact, if I don't miss my guess, the news of your daughter's successes and the new design have already made it Home."

"You'd better believe it," said the voice of a young girl next to Muriel. Mata had reverted to the 12 year old. Muriel's mother looked puzzled, until Mata smiled and introduced herself, again. "This is the way Muriel first saw me, and what she's most comfortable with. That may change with time, but for now I'm happy that she likes it. It makes my job much easier that she thinks of me as a friend – someone she can confide in and tease."

"But isn't there another Mata? Doesn't it cause confusion?" asked Muriel's mother.

"Nope. There's only me. Security chief to your daughter and responsible for 4 squads of Envoys, companion, victim of her teasing, organizer and the one who has to have attention to detail. With her, it's a fun job. Not like poor Bart does for Ted. Talk about boring . . ."

A bass voice from behind quietly said, "I'm not sure with you if it's a security detail or a protection racket. Oh, and I like you, too, Mata."

"Bart! What's up?" asked Ted.

"There's a little piss-ant of a jerk at the entrance that DEMANDS entrance. He didn't even try to come in first, and he didn't make it a request. I think he deserves a bit of a show."

"Hmm. Well, from the timing and your description, I'd have to say that that's Mr. Scot with your credentials. He really should be replaced, but the President insists on leaving him as Secretary of State. Ladies and gentlemen – oh, and you, too, Mata – I think I know what this is about. I'll be right back." He stood up, moved away from his chair, took one step and disappeared.

The next moment there was the sound of an explosion, followed loudly by a deep bass voice, "How dare you DEMAND entrance to this Embassy. This will be reported to your superiors. If you have business with me, make it fast. I'm losing patience."

"Oh, my. He can put on a show. But I thought that one was beneath him. It's too bad the President can't see souls. He'd have been out long ago. Vicious little war-monger," Bart muttered to himself, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. Then quickly added, "Warn the squads. Incoming!"

Twenty Envoys suddenly filled the room. "Mom," Muriel said quietly, "stay here, and keep dad here and quiet." Muriel got up and moved toward the door just as there was another explosion in front of the building. A much larger Ted stood there, holding Mr. Scot as if he were a rag doll. "Set him down, please, Ted," she said, quietly.

With the Secretary of State firmly on the ground and Ted returned to his normal stature, he felt a bit more confident and started sputtering, "This is outrageous. You do not treat . . ."

Muriel interrupted with, "Mr. Scot, you have in the past few moments managed to insult an ambassador and head of a foreign nation. I can tell you that if you're looking to start an international incident you couldn't have found a better way short of firing a missile at him. What you may not realize is that the war would be brief and lack all the bloody bits you think are necessary. Oh, and there would only be one casualty. You. Now stop acting like a pompous jack-ass and state your business here."

"Not that it's the business of a mere child, but I'm here to deliver the acceptance of credentials to Muriel White."

As Muriel walked toward him, she grew. Looking him directly in the eye, she back-handed him hard enough to put him on the ground. "And now," she said, still speaking

quietly, “you’ve managed to insult the person you were sent to meet. I am Muriel White.” She reached toward him and seemed to pull a piece of paper out of the air, glanced at it and handed it to Ted. “Is this what it appears to be?” she asked.

“It is. Check your pocket.”

Muriel reached for her invisible pocket and pulled out a small green book with a strange design on the cover. And the words “Diplomat” and “Home Passport” on the cover. Looking inside, she found herself looking at herself or at least her picture. She closed it up and put it away.

“Mr. Scot, the letter of acceptance of my credentials could have been handled by anyone, and certainly didn’t need to be delivered by you in person. Those were both your choice because you wanted to see who I was. I have the feeling that you intend to target me, a citizen of the United States who has been accepted by the nation known as Home as a bridge between our peoples. You were instructed to have one of your people deliver the acceptance because much wiser heads than you see the value in peaceful camaraderie and mutual exchange between the two nations.” ::Ted, has this been recorded in a way that can be sent to the President?::

::Yes,:: he replied.

“Your behavior, Mr. Scot, has been noted and will be reported to the appropriate persons in a manner which you will not be able to refute. Return to your vehicle. I’m sure you will be contacted concerning this. I will accept no apology for your provocative behavior, but I will not hold it against my native country. Begone!” And with that, Mr. Scot found himself off Embassy property and in his car.

As they turned back to the dining hall, Ted said, “I do believe that you’ve had it with bullies. Well played. I especially liked the back-hand. And taking “insult” for being a mere child, as well as his behavior toward one that’s been accepted by two nations. Marvelous. My only question is, ‘why did you leave him alive?’ ”

“Because, right now, he’s the President’s problem. I meant it about the war, though. If he starts one, I’ll finish it. And he’ll be the only casualty. Lunch. Suddenly, I’m VERY hungry.”

She sat down and reached for her fork. And noticed another change. “Mata?”

“You defended yourself, your birth country, your adopted nation, and this Embassy. You also did something we hadn’t taught you. You grew, and kept in proportion doing it. Very well done. And, to top it off, you’re an accredited diplomat attached to this Embassy. To be exact, an Envoy Diplomat Plenipotentiary. You’re as untouchable as the Ambassador. I’d say you deserve the second stripe. Besides, the single one made your pants look lopsided,” she added with a grin. “You certainly do have a way of speaking.”

“I just got reamed out by Bart for using “god mode” on that little pipsqueak. But he irritated me. Demanding entrance. He knows full well that this is an open Embassy. Anyone

can come in. He could have just come in quietly and been guided to us without any fuss. He chose to be deliberately pompous and grating. I'll admit that slapping him down the way you did was better. The only way to treat an insult is to either ignore it or stuff it back down the person's throat. I think your choice was best," Ted said.

"I have a confession," Mata added. "He didn't go back to his office. He and the record were delivered directly to the President by one of your security detail. And I do mean delivered – picked up by the scruff of the neck and marched into his office. By now, the President has seen the whole shameful thing. If Mr. Scot remains in office, then I'll be very surprised."

"By the way, Ted," Muriel said, quietly, "he couldn't just come in. Look at his soul. Muddy black. He's not a puppet, but he is out to destroy America, this Embassy, and if he can find a way, Home. I wasn't kidding about killing him if he tries to start a war with us. The man is evil, and by his own choice. Mata, do we need to change the training?"

"Yes and no," Mata replied. "You need the rest of it as it stands. But we need to have Ted teach you what you want. We've never done it. He's the only one that has. Ted, do we need to have her come back tomorrow for the tutorial session?"

"Nope. I can show her what she needs to know when lunch is over. It'll only take a moment. And you can do the next training starting from right here, which will save her the walk back." Ted paused a moment, then added, "all in all, I think this has been a very productive day. She shouldn't have any problem with the rest of the training, and the tutorial is a simple dump. Ten or 15 minutes at most. Muriel, you may have your third and fourth stripes before you go home. I'm not sure how they rate things, but it would seem to me that they want you ranked with me as quickly as possible. No, I think we should finish what we can today, and let her have tomorrow to recover and let everything settle in."

"Wait a minute," said Mrs. White. "Are you telling me that you're talking about learning how to kill? I forbid it! You're just a little girl. You shouldn't be doing such things!"

"Then who should? The police? They don't know what to look for, or even how to look. The government? Same thing," said Muriel. "Mother, you've taught me that I should defend myself, but then you've told me that I shouldn't fight. And to top it off you put me in a school loaded with bullies and left me with no way to defend myself. Today I struck back. I didn't accept Mr. Scot's bullying, slapped him down, and reported him to his supervisor, the President. That was non-lethal. But it won't stop there. Bullies never realize when they've gone too far, and one like him will think that he's justified in using force. He may try to kill Ted or me, which would be difficult if not impossible. Or he might try to kill or kidnap you or dad or both. To hold your lives over my head to get me to knuckle under to him. I'm not knuckling any more."

"My squads will protect you while I'm with you. But I'm not always going to be with you. So the choice is to risk your lives, or have you move into the Enclave. I know they accept guests. Or defend you myself. I refuse to allow you to be harmed because of a bully. Should something happen I will act, and act in such a way that the same issue will never come up

again. You and dad mean a lot to me. I love you, and want you protected the best way possible.”

“Mrs. White,” Ted said quietly, “Mr. Scot was trying to start a war. A war with a nation that could crush America easier than you crack an egg. This is my country, too, though I no longer claim citizenship. In fact, it would be difficult for me to do so. According to records filed with the government I’m dead, killed by a mugger with a single shot to the head. Mr. Scot won’t rest until he sees his plans put in action, and doesn’t understand the danger of doing so. He’s not just a bad man or a bully. He’s evil. The President has just been put on notice of his behavior in a way that is indisputable. Either he will act to pull Mr. Scot’s power to activate those plans, or we will be forced to defend ourselves. I don’t hold much hope that the President will act. Mr. Scot is too glib a liar.”

“What do you think he’ll say?” asked Muriel

“I think Mr. Scot will say that we pose a threat to national security because we cannot be controlled. That we need to be eliminated.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Muriel’s mother.

“We’re going to have to take him out of the game. Get him fired, if we can. Kill him if he threatens us with violence,” Muriel said. “It would be much better if we could isolate him and find out who’s controlling him. But the people behind the scenes will be pretty cunning. They’re not going to want to be noticed.”

“OK, well, lunch is over. Ready for more training?” asked Ted. “Most of this isn’t HOW to do it, but under what circumstances and what method you use. I’ll do that in a dump. It’s easier that way.” He paused to put his thoughts in order, then dumped the whole of it into Muriel. “The rest is how to grab a soul and destroy it.” He then showed her how it was done.

“That’s it? And the Envoys can’t do it?”

“No, they don’t want to do it. I don’t blame them, either. They don’t have our controls, yet. Once we’ve blended across better, they may change their mind. Right now all they will do is spot black spots, and make recommendations. And that’s fine with me.”

“Now, as for getting back to your office-to-be. Gather your troops outside. It doesn’t matter what orientation you are to where you want to go. Make them an extension of yourself and think of a space large enough to fit them in. Link to all of them – you can do that, can’t you?”

“Yea, they showed me on the walk here. It made it easier to decide how to place them when we got here. I even linked to the squad that was already here, so that they were in the right place.”

“Good! The link is just so everyone steps off together. So, you visualize the place, link, and all step off. And you’re there.”

Muriel lined up the squads in single files 4 columns across behind her, Mata beside her, then stepped forward and disappeared.

Chapter 5

The Office

(Saturday afternoon)

The placement, when they arrived a step later, was just about perfect. Mata admitted that she pushed the group forward a bit, but considered it a successful translation.

“Practice will make it better. Just as practice with the things you've learned will make them better and easier. How are you doing so far?”

“Frustrated,” Muriel replied. “Other than that, no problem. No headaches, a little pressure from the tutorial dump this morning. That was expected, though. So, what's next? Practice, or is there something new?”

“A little of both. Something a little new that builds on what you already know. You're going to design your office,” Mata said with a wicked grin. “You've already jumped the gun by getting bigger and staying in proportion. So, first we'll get you changing size and age. It's easiest to go backward, since on some level you remember what it was like. Then we'll progress you forward in age to what you project you will look like in the future. After that, we'll see about how you want to design the office. Ted's expecting that, if the President DOES fire the jerk, that we'll be getting another visit, and it'll include credentials and passport for you as an American Ambassador to Home. You'll need an office for that, even if you never use it. Ted has one outside the Enclave, in the back of the gas station we have out there. He says it keeps him from being inundated by idiots. I think he also has one inside Enclave, but I've never been there.”

“So, first reduce your age to, say, 10. Remember to change your uniform at the same time or the guys will get a thrill.”

“You wish,” muttered one of the guys.

Muriel thought of what she looked like at 10. Thin to the point of being rangy, no figure at all, and an expression that would etch glass. She hadn't liked her life at that age. Then she thought of what changes she would have to make to her uniform. It almost would have been simpler to dress the way she had at that age. But she persevered until she had what she thought was a match. Then pushed herself into it. The uniform seemed a bit loose, so she tightened it up some, then looked at Mata.

“Not bad,” Mata said. “The only boggle was the uniform, and you corrected it quickly enough. Practice will take care of that. Now, I want you to slide from 10 up to 18. Not move directly, but just kinda slide up there, passing through your actual age.”

“Ur. That's going to be harder. OK, let me think about it.” She thought for a moment, about how to go about sliding up through the ages, and was confounded by the complexity of

the task. Then she thought again. The times when she'd been successful, she'd just imagined what she wanted and did it. Her mind sorted out the petty details. Just like catching a ball. She didn't have to calculate trajectory and speed. She just put her hand out and the ball landed in it. She grinned. It couldn't be that simple, could it? So she did it. And Mata's mouth dropped open.

"You're not supposed to be able to do that that quickly!"

"There's a trick to it," Muriel replied, quietly. "Don't think about it, just do it."

"Minx. Beast!," exclaimed Mata.

"Jealous slave-driver," Muriel replied. Both were grinning, and someone behind her let out a whoop.

"You," said Mata, looking at her, "are going to be one regal knockout at 18. We'll have to get you a chastity belt."

"Only if you want itching powder in your underwear. Seriously, did I do alright?"

"Better than alright. Ted can't do it, yet. And we have trouble with sliding. We can move pretty quickly between sizes and ages that we know about or have practiced. New ones take a little longer. Part of the reason we had to get the squads away from you before they became kids."

"Can I go back to being me, now?"

"Sure. Then we can help you turn this into an office. Uh, huh. Just like we helped you slide up through the ages, we'll help." Somehow, Muriel thought that she was kidding.

"Ted's right, you know," she said as she melted back to her actual age. "It's much better to be able to banter and tease. It relieves tension and frustration . . . and other emotions . . . than the stuffy give and take orders. Are we going to need the soundproofed room any more?"

"Nope," Mata replied, and the room disappeared.

"OK, I don't know what the plumbing and electrical are like in here, but here's what I'm thinking. One squad on that side – 2, 2, and 1? Or three across the front and two behind?"

"Three across, with the squad leader closest to the door," Mata said.

"Good. I like that. Then if I have to move quickly the squad can be right with me. The other side would be my office, desk facing the window, but back far enough for casual seating as well as 2 regular chairs in front of my desk. Captain's chairs, maybe? With padding? Floor . . . Something other than concrete, that's for certain. Tile? Like ceramic tile? We could run that all the way back, and make cleaning a lot easier. Maybe a throw rug for the casual

seating area. Squad room/break room in back, for the other three squads, if they happen to be here. Are those stairs over there? What's upstairs?"

"Your apartment, should you need it. I like the idea of the squad room/break room. There may be times when you need all four nearby. Divider?"

"No. If they need to move in a hurry, I don't want a pinch point. How about bathroom? Probably 2, because visitors would want male and female. Outlets. We need to find out if pop machines run on standard voltage. I think they do."

"OK, hold on. Chuck. Plumbing. Bathrooms, sink and stool, male and female there. Frank, cupboards and sink, leave space for a refrigerator, back wall from the bathrooms to the corner. Doug, pop machines? And electrical for them. Also big screen TV that wall, at the end of the stairs, and stem outlets for desks, 3 and 2, that side in front of the window. Leave space for rapid exit. Muriel, what about the walls? Decorative tan, against reddish tan tiles?"

"Sounds good. But maybe in my space, panel?"

"Got it. Something in oak or knotty pine, maybe. We'll see how it looks. Doug, add 2 stem receptacles on this side for computers, too. Two desks, oversize. Mine is in the middle of the room. Jenny, tile, lay it before or after the stems go in?"

"Before. You can drill through it, even if you decide on stone instead. We just have to lay the circuits before we tile. I'll cover that and show you how it's done. It's not complicated, just tedious, and you have to do things in the proper order. Oh, and don't stem Muriel's desk. Wall receptacle about 3'-6". Should put it above the desktop. Plus receptacles for the casual area. I'll figure it out. And if I'm wrong I'll correct it. No sweat."

"Furniture," chimed in Nancy. "I think I can see what Muriel wants. All of it is stock or easily done. I can have it in as soon as the other work is done."

"Good. Muriel, why don't we go upstairs and look at potentials for your apartment."

Upstairs was one large room, much like downstairs. The only windows were in the front, and they were the same business style full length windows that were downstairs. With plumbing being at the back of the building downstairs, it was felt that kitchen and bathroom should be in the same general space and allow for the stairwell. The bathroom, being single and private, would have more than just a sink and a stool. Bathtub/shower, bidet, vanity counter for the sink, and of course tile floor. Same tile in the kitchen. Great room entered right from the kitchen would hold dining table and living room furniture. The dining table would be large to account for late night conferences or parties. It was agreed that the bedroom would be in the front, but the windows would have to be changed for better privacy. Wood floors from the edge of the kitchen to the front of the building. Mata stored the ideas in her head as generalized pictures, and they went back downstairs.

Except that the stairs had changed. What had been industrial style metal stairs were now wood with elegant treads, risers, railings, and paneling on the walls. As they got lower,

they found that the squad had been busy indeed. The work was done, complete with some embellishments that Muriel hadn't thought of. Where the single pull-to-open door had been was now double sliding doors that snapped out of the way like something out of a science fiction TV program. On the doors were the words "Office of the Diplomatic Adjutant" with just her first name in under it.

"The title will change, over time. But for the time being, that's enough to let people know where you are," Mata said, in a matter of fact way.

The windows no longer went to the floor, but ended about desk height. The paneling on Muriel's side of the room matched a large, elegant desk and wood and leather executive chair. Simpler but comfortable Captain's chairs with arms set in front of the desk. The casual area had a single rocking recliner and side table facing the window, with a couch and coffee table backed up to the windows.

Across the room five desks set with enough space for the occupants to just push back and run toward the door. On the wall beside the second row of desks were wood cupboards with office supplies and space for records. The desks were of the same wood as Muriel's, but of simpler, utilitarian design and no sharp corners or edges. One squad was already seated working on reports of the day's activities. Computers were up and running, and so was a security system that viewed inside and outside the office.

Centered on the doors and in line with Muriel's desk was Mata's. Again, the same wood was used, and though more ornate than the squad desks, it was less so than Muriel's. The computer was up and running a basic screen-saver that Muriel had never seen before.

Behind that was the squad room/break room, going across the building, with lounge chairs, similar to the one Muriel had been trained in, for 15 people at a time, and distance between them so that the squads could run out without having to stumble around or through things. A flat screen TV was on the wall behind Muriel's desk, at the end of the staircase. The kitchen area sported a table or counter top like an island, as well as sink, dishwasher, refrigerator, and 2 pop machines and cupboards for dishes and snack foods. The walls were tan outside of Muriel's office, with sweeping design on them that almost looked like desert horizon. The floors were a slightly more reddish color tile throughout. Easy to clean and take care of.

The one thing that was missing was 3 of the squads.

"Um . . . where is everyone?" Muriel asked.

"Oh, don't worry about them. One squad went back to help Ted with your parents. The other two are busy. They'll be along, later," Mata replied.

"This is wonderful, but how am I going to pay for all of it?"

"Fringe benefit of being an Envoy diplomat. All of this is made either at Home or here. Most of it probably here, by the same way that you made your uniform. And it's your squads'

duty to take care of you, so they did the work. Simple.”

“Which means,” said Muriel, “that they're upstairs doing the apartment.”

“Don't,” said Mata. “They want to surprise you. Whether you believe it or not, you made a hit with them. You treat them as people, you listen to suggestions, you show us what it is to be human even though you're still struggling with it, yourself. And you learn. Sometimes faster than we think you can or should. Like wanting to be the one to make the link to me, right off the bat. Like that trick you pulled off growing, in proportion, so you were bigger than that jerk from State. Speaking of which, HOW did you manage to deck him?”

“Oh, that. I cheated. I anchored the shield into the ground. Then pulled it back to just outside my skin and put my over-sized weight behind it. At that size, I outweighed him. Mostly, the shield did the work.”

“Yea. That's what I mean about learning faster than we thought you could. You did the same sort of thing with the bullets, too, didn't you? Don't bother to answer. I know you did. I was backstopping your shield, but close to you. You never budged when they hit. I've seen Envoys get pushed backward by that much force. Even anchoring, you're only anchored at one point . . .”

“Huh? No, you anchor all around you, like a circle, then create a dome over your head that's part of the same shield. It's all only one shield. It'll pass normal air and sound, but won't pass anything else. Look, if you poured a bucket of paint over me, you'd see the shape of it, briefly.”

“ONE shield? You don't build a box?”

Muriel laughed, “No, only one shield. A curved surface has more strength than a flat one.”

“Oh. We never thought of that. OK, the word's going out on that, NOW. Then I'm going to practice it, myself. Hang on. I think the troops are returning. Get ready to be amazed.”

Sure enough, the squads returned, and escorted her back upstairs to see what they'd done. And it was amazing. The wall away from the stairway had the same type of horizon as the floor below, but lower on the wall. Above that was the suggestion of sunset over the desert. Golds and reds fading to darker colors, and a dark ceiling. Not black, which would have been depressing, but that deep blue that's actually somewhat warm despite what artists say. The furniture was similar in style to her desk and casual furniture downstairs. But much more comfortable looking. The bed was enormous. And wood floor with throw rugs instead of tile. TV and entertainment center with surround sound that would probably break windows a block away if she turned it up too loud. The kitchen was stocked with both fresh and packaged foods. The bathroom was something a girl would be willing to kill for.

She never had to say a word. Her expression said it all. But just to be sure, she

hugged everyone that had made her office and apartment a home away from home.

“We should really think about finishing the tutoring. You want to do it up here, or downstairs?” asked Mata.

“Downstairs. During normal working hours I should probably be down there. Maybe not in my office section, but at least available. Besides, you need to teach me how to lock the door.”

They trooped back down just in time to watch a very puzzled Envoy appear in front of the door. He stopped and read it, then walked forward, and jumped when it whooshed out of the way. He tentatively walked in, his eyes bugged out and his mouth open.

“No wonder I couldn't find the place. MAN you've changed it. This is beautiful. I wonder if that's what Ted meant. He told me to get over here and warn you he was bringing your parents and the rest of the squad. He was really in a tizzy, going on about you doing something and turning all the Envoy posts and Home upside down with it. Wait a minute. I'd better give him a visual.”

He went blank for a moment, and when he came back into focus Ted, her parents and the last squad were standing in the street staring at the door. Ted walked forward, and the door whooshed open, which caused him a bit of a pause. But he continued and the rest followed. When everyone was clear of the door, it silently and smoothly closed behind them.

“Oh-Kay. This is really something. You want all 4 squads to be able to be here at one time. Nice. But without necessarily having to be here? Of course. And when they don't have to be here, it's still a congregation point. VERY good. A spot for Mata to field people coming in, and a two-phase office area with formal and casual areas. Security cameras to monitors, computers for reports and whatever. Exceptional. You've been doing some thinking. However, WHAT DID YOU DO TO ALL THE ENVOYS?”

“Oops. I didn't mean to do anything. Mata simply asked me how I managed to deck Mr. Scot. And I told her how my shield was constructed. I guess she passed the word.”

“And just how do you construct your shields?”

“Um. It's shield. Singular. I create a circle around me and draw it up and dome over the top. You know, like those clocks in a glass dome? That way it anchors into the ground all the way around. It can't be moved unless you move it.”

“Oh. OH! Can they be layered?”

“I don't see why not. I just haven't done it yet. In theory, they can be layered and interlinked through the ground.”

“Yep. That would definitely put the fox in the hen house. And you taught Mata?”

"Well, I told her about it, and how it was constructed. I don't know if I taught her."

"That's three."

"Three?" Muriel asked. Then looked at her sleeve. "Oh. Oh, crap. I'm sorry. I guess I was out of line."

"Not ever. But you're definitely moving faster than I expected. I thought it would take weeks or even a year to get to this point. You've done it in less than 24 hours, and become the darling of every Envoy there is. I don't think there's any work getting done in Home. So, is this all the changes you've made?"

"Well, a couple of the squads worked upstairs, too. I just got through looking at it. I think they did a pretty good job."

"Upstairs." He took them three at a time, then things were very, very quiet.

"Would you like to go upstairs, too?" she asked her parents. You don't have to walk up. I can take you.

"I thought that only worked on the flat," her father said.

"Oh, no. Distance and direction don't matter. What matters is knowing where you're going. Just hold my hands, and when I say 'NOW', take a step forward." A moment later, they were standing in the great room.

"Muriel," her mother said. "This is like a one room apartment, isn't it."

"Yes, mom. In case I have to work late, or something comes up that needs me around. I probably won't need it for a long time, but the squads felt it should be here for me and ready when I do need it."

Her mother grabbed her in a tight hug and cried. Her father just patted her back and asked, "You will be coming home sometimes, won't you?"

"Probably most of the time. I've still got to work out what my job really is. Other than a figurehead or something. And I've still got to go to school. In fact, I was just about to get the last of my tutoring when you came."

"Muriel, this . . . all this and your office. This is beautiful. And so much like you, yet it isn't. It's hard to take in all at once. You've changed, somehow. Yet you're the same. You've got more confidence than I've ever seen you have. And you look good in that uniform. OK, OK, we shouldn't hold you up from your tutoring. You go ahead. We'll come down in a little bit. OK?"

"OK, mom. Oh, and the reason it's like me but not like me is that I told Mata what I thought would be good. She told the squads to work on it, and they added in things they

thought I'd like. And I do. They have good taste."

Muriel and the ever faithful Mata went back downstairs. It took a while for Muriel to clear her mind, in fact she needed help doing it, then the last three tutorials were dumped into her as fast as she could take them. Her squads surrounded her in the break room area lending support and reassurance just by being there. Just as she was finishing up Ted brought her parents back down.

"I thought you were getting tutored," her father said, as he saw her reclined in one of the break room chairs.

"Yes. In fact, I got three sessions before you came down. So I'm done for today. It's not like tutoring like you think of it. Each session dumped about 3 years worth of information in a particular area into me. They'll sort themselves out, with time, and I'll be able to use them."

"Isn't that cheating?" he asked.

"Is it? I don't think so. It's much more efficient and less prone to mistakes and misinterpretations. There are so many things that people NEED to learn that aren't taught in school. Having the raw information to start with would give them time to learn those things. The connections between subjects and the times the people were living in. Things like that. I'm getting the sense of some of it from this morning's sessions. And now I know how to answer Ted's question of what's wrong with the school I'm in."

"Ted," Muriel said, "what I'm in is a school for bullies. The bullies get away with whatever they want, and the rest are victims. And the school board doesn't oversee it properly to realize that that's what's happening. The principal, herself, is one of the biggest bullies, calling the victims "wimps" and such when they get picked on. Some girls have already left the school because of the actions of bullies, such as grabbing them and pulling down their pants, and more. And this in an elementary school."

Muriel considered for a moment, then said, "Ted, is there any way that I can be schooled here? Like home schooling or whatever it's called? Because I think Monday it's all going to come to a head. I won't show up in uniform. But I'll be dressed nicely, and in a dress or skirt and blouse. It's going to attract attention. Which is to say it's going to attract the bullies. Only they're not going to be able to bully me, which is going to create MORE attention. I expect that the principal will get involved and try to deny that the bullies were misbehaving."

"So," Ted said, "you want witnesses."

"Yes, and recordings. And maybe the media, so that no one can say we doctored the recordings. This needs to be blown wide open."

"You got it. Squads?"

"Two, I think. Not to protect me, but to protect the bullies from the rest of the victims as soon as they realize that they CAN stand together and stand up for themselves. That they don't HAVE to put up with the indecent behavior and outright theft. I don't want it to turn bloody."

"You'll have four squads and like it, young lady," Mata cut in fiercely, and trying hard not to laugh. "I caught your thought. And I think you're right. As soon as you walk on school grounds wearing something nice, they're going to try to mess it up. Especially in a skirt or dress. And all you have to do is stand there and they can't touch you. You are a nasty girl."

"I know, but look who I have as an example. An overage teenage male and a wannabe Envoy girl," Muriel giggled and stuck out her tongue.

"Actually it may be worse than that," Muriel went on. "Ted, if things get really rough, I mean that would endanger the kids that aren't bullies, would I be out of line to switch to uniform and call the squads?"

"No," He dragged it out a bit, thoughtfully. "No, I don't think so. Can you protect the other kids that way?"

"Well," said Mata, "If we can't bottle the bullies up enough to protect the others, we'll call for reinforcements. But I think she has the shape of it. We'll just have to let it run and see how it plays out."

"I think I see what my part in this is, too," Ted said. "I'll need to contact the media and let them know that something could be going down. But not what." He stopped and thought for a moment. "Something like "Muriel White, recently selected as an ambassador by the Envoys of Home to represent them to the American people, will be going back to school, Monday, like any other normal 12 year old child."

"Ooo! Now that IS wicked. That's like throwing down the gauntlet to them, challenging them to outdo themselves," giggled Mata. "Especially after the firestorm of what happened to Mr. Scot. You DID have that published, didn't you?"

"Of course," replied Ted. "Also of course they downplayed it, and cast it as all Muriel's fault. Gotta save face for the administration, after all. But if she doesn't hit back, Monday, it's going to show that she can control herself in the face of extreme provocation. I like it. On the one hand she will fight to protect those that can't protect themselves, and on the other she'll stand there and let them wear themselves out trying to harm her."

"There is one problem, though," Ted said. "You may not be welcome back in that school. And the school, itself, may not have anything to do with it. Yes, I think we can get "home tutoring status" set up for you, here. And your friends from school will always be welcome to come here."

Chapter 6

The School of Hard Knocks (Monday morning)

School had always been a chore for Muriel. The class work was bad enough. All that memorization with nothing to attach it to. No explanation as to what it related to. Probably the dumbest, most inefficient method of teaching that ever existed. Yet it was normal in elementary school.

But worse were the bullies. They were always there, and they were never stopped from intimidating kids that didn't know how to defend themselves. In fact, any kid that did defend herself was immediately disciplined by the teachers and principal. They weren't allowed to fight back in any way.

But Monday was different for Muriel. She knew they'd try to pick on her as soon as she showed up wearing something nice. So she chose a white blouse and yellow flowered jumper, low shoes and short socks. She might as well have painted a target on herself. Any girl wearing a skirt could expect that the bullies would try to lift it up. Some of them ended up having underpants pulled down, exposing them to anyone that was near. And the teachers would stand by and laugh. They weren't laughing Monday morning, though.

Muriel walked through the gate to the school grounds. One of her friends quickly came up to her and warned her that she should leave before the bullies arrived.

"It's OK, Carla. Just stay out of the way and away from the bullies. They won't hurt me. I promise."

No sooner had Carla ducked into the crowd, then the first of the bullies arrived, taunting her and trying to reach for her skirt. But since Muriel was shielded, he couldn't reach it, and Muriel kept walking as if nothing were happening. This, of course, made him mad, and he called in others. They ringed her so that she couldn't continue walking without pushing through them.

In the mean time, the media was recording the fact that this now famous girl was going to school like any other child. The on-site reporter caught what was going on, and told the cameraman to keep the camera on, no matter what, and sent back to the studio that it looked like a situation was developing. The studio agreed. They could see Muriel, they could see the bullies, and they could see the teachers just standing there doing nothing about it, and the announcer began asking questions as to why they were letting it happen.

The reporter kept up a running commentary. First the bullies just taunted. Then one of them picked up some mud from the recent rain and threw it at Muriel. Of course it never reached her, just sliding off the shield. And, of course, the reporter commented on this, and on the fact that it looked like the bullies couldn't touch her. Then another bully picked up a

rock and threw it hard at Muriel's head. Muriel just stood there ignoring the fact that the rock was a foot from her head, stuck in what appeared to be thin air.

This outrage to the bullies' sensibilities couldn't go unpunished by them. So they rushed her, all trying to grab her at once. Muriel simply expanded the shields and pushed them back, leaving minor trenches in the ground where their feet skidded. At this point, Muriel appeared to take notice of them. Suddenly she was wearing a gray uniform instead of a dress. And the next moment she was ringed by 6 people in similar gray uniforms. And the bullies were ringed on the outside with 15 more. The squads had arrived.

The media suddenly realized that what was taking place could very easily escalate to an international incident. The Envoys did nothing toward the bullies. They simply contained them so that they couldn't do anything else.

"You have attempted to assault me and restrain me," Muriel's voice was audible to everyone in the schoolyard without seeming to strain or shout. Even the media microphones picked it up easily. "You are therefore restrained from attempting anything more while you wait for the police to arrive. You are free to move around inside the ring, but you will not leave the ring until the police have taken you into custody."

Then Muriel looked up at the building and the teachers assembled there. "You teachers are, according to the school board rules, supposed to stop bullying activity and discipline those that engage in it. Instead, you've chosen to simply stand by and watch. In the entire time that I've been in this school no bully has been disciplined for his or her actions. Instead, you've come down hard on the victims, saying that it was their fault. You will also be held accountable for your behavior."

Another figure approached the school gates, but didn't enter. His approach was noted by the reporter on scene. He quickly went over to him and said, "Sir! Mr. Ted."

"No," said Ted. "Just Ted."

"Alright, then, Ted. Are you going to do something about this? She's one of your diplomats, isn't she?"

"Nope, not going to do a thing" replied. "She's an American citizen, as well as a diplomat to the American people. She can take care of herself. After all, the law is on her side. She's been attacked and restrained against her will. Both are illegal according to American law. She has made no overt moves to defend herself, yet the teachers . . . oh, and I notice the principal among them . . . have done nothing to stop the situation and discipline the bullies. I'd say that was aiding and abetting. Or, if you prefer, conspiracy before the fact. Nope. I'm just going to stand here and watch what happens."

"But sir," asked the reporter, "aren't you afraid she'll get hurt?"

"How? They can't reach her."

At this point a shot rang out. The cameras picked up the principal lowering a pistol. They also noted that, not only had Muriel failed to fall down, but the bullet was stuck in mid-air a foot from her head.

“What? . . . How?” the reporter stammered.

“We train our people in passive defense techniques. It would appear that they are effective. It would also appear that the principal may be charged with attempted murder. Fascinating, as a character on one of your old TV shows would have said.”

A group of people approached Ted and talked briefly to him. One pulled out a cell phone, spoke for a few seconds, then put it away. “The buses are on their way. Is there any way you can help contain the teachers and principal?” he asked.

“Perhaps, but not legally. Legally I have no authority here. Even Muriel's is limited in what she can do due to the fact that she's an underage child citizen.”

The man made another phone call which apparently included a heated discussion with the person on the other end. “Security's coming. They DO have the authority. That of the school board. This school is closed until further notice.” This last was directed at the reporter. “The students will be bused to other schools for the remainder of the year. Appropriate schedules and arrangements will be made in the next couple of days. Parents are requested to keep their children at home or have appropriate adult supervision of their children until we can make those arrangements. It is unfortunate that this situation has continued for as long as it has. When it was first suspected we took steps to investigate. That investigation is now concluded. To the parents of the children that have been so victimized, I apologize. I wish we had realized sooner what was going on. It will not be allowed to happen again.”

“Captain Moore,” the reporter said, turning to the officer in charge, “what will you do with these children?”

“They will be held in a Juvenal detention center until their parents can be located. They will then go before a judge to be arraigned. What happens after that is not part of my job description. But considering what I saw before we were called out, I would hope that appropriate action were taken.”

“I have here,” a man in a suit had approached unnoticed until he spoke, “a warrant for the arrest of one Muriel White for incitement to riot, assault with bodily harm, and defiance of due authority.” He handed the warrant to the police captain, and added, “I expect that this will be executed immediately.”

“Really!” Ted said. “And who are you?”

“That is none of your business,” the man replied. “This is a Federal warrant and takes precedence over all other actions.”

::Bart?::

:: Covered. A higher Federal judge should be showing up, now. It's our friend Mr. Scot, of course. The action will be quashed.::

"May I see that, please?" Another figure had appeared. This one dressed in a judicial robe. "Oh, I'm Judge Adams of the Federal Court of Appeals. Now, if you please, sir."

"But sir, this action is being taken by the Department of State."

"Now, sir!" The paper was handed over by the Captain, and thoroughly examined by the Judge. After a moment, Judge Adams said, "this action is quashed. There will be no arrest of Miss White. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," The State Department person said. "But sir, this is a clear violation of the authority of the Department of State."

"What is your name," the Judge asked.

"Clarence Holmes, sir."

"Mister Holmes, you miss-spoke your last sentence. What we have here is a clear violation of authority BY the Department of State. To wit, a violation of the treaty between the Envoys of Home and the United States of America. It will not be tolerated, and in fact your department is hereby forbidden from attempting any further violation of the treaty. Don't bother discussing it with Mr. Scot. I'm sure that in the next few minutes he will be made firmly aware of the fact. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! Ted," the judge said, turning to the Ambassador, "would I be out line if I asked to meet the young lady? She certainly seems to have control over the situation."

"Of course, your honor. Just let us get this mess cleaned up a bit, and I'll ask her to come over."

By this time, the bullies had been rounded up and taken into custody. Buses were lined up to take the rest of the kids home, and more officers had arrived to take the teachers into custody. Ted sent a mental probe to Muriel asking if she would be willing to meet a judge on friendly terms, to which she turned and smiled. The squads immediately re-formed behind her as she walked over to Ted.

"Muriel," Ted said, "I'd like you to meet Judge Adams of the Federal Court of Appeals. Your honor, Miss Muriel White, American citizen and Ambassador for the Envoys of Home to the United States of America.

"Your Honor," Muriel responded.

"It is certainly my honor to meet such a brave young lady, Miss White."

"Muriel, please, your Honor. And it really wasn't that brave. They couldn't hurt me, or even get ahold of me."

"But somebody shot at you!"

"It doesn't matter, The bullet never came closer than one foot from me. Speaking of which, Captain, you might want this. I haven't touched it, honest." The Captain got an evidence bag, and Muriel transferred the air-born bullet to it without touching it.

"I'm very happy to see that IT also never touch YOU," the Captain said with a smile.

"Well, young lady," said Judge Adams, "I should probably get going. I hope to see you again under favorable and less dramatic circumstances. By the way, do you stay at the Enclave, now?"

"No. I stay with my parents," Muriel responded, puzzled.

"Perhaps Ambassador Ted would find a place to put you both up for a while, then. You see, I know both the man that requested this warrant and the judge that signed it. They won't rest. They'll try to find some way to get ahold of you, if they can. If they can't, they'll try to get your parents to force you to come to them."

"Your Honor," said Ted, "aren't you in danger, too, then? I can offer you the same accommodation or, if you prefer, an Envoy security detail."

"Oh, I can't be pinned down to the Enclave, though I hope to have a chance to visit sometime. But I might be persuaded to accept a security detail. But where would I house them and how would I feed them?"

"Feeding and housing them would be no problem for you, because we would take care of all that." ::Bart?:

::On it, boss. And they have Muriel's new shield style. Same method. Four squads of five, all male for him, I think, and able to all be available at once if necessary, or even call for reinforcements::

"You won't know they're there unless something happens. Just go about your normal routine and don't worry about it," Ted added to the judge.

"Oh! Well . . . thank you. Let me know the cost."

"No cost, your Honor. We don't charge for protection. People might consider it a racket," he quipped.

"Humph. Bad pun, but I take your point. Very well. I did accept. Thank you again."

And with that the judge left.

::Mata?: Muriel asked.

::I heard. I've got two squads on your parents right now, and am getting volunteers for one more. Try to get them into the Enclave, though. I think the judge is right. This could get nasty::

::Ted?:

::Courage, kid. I'll admit that I didn't see this coming, but the judge could be right. We'll both work on getting your parents into the Enclave. In the mean time, you did very well, today. Exceptionally well. You showed what you can do, in a limited way, but you also solved the problem the school board had with this school. None of this was being reported from inside the school. Even I didn't realize how extensive it was, and that the teachers were backing the principal. But we shut their little scheme down::

::OK,:: Muriel sent. ::I'm taking my squads back to the office. I'll standby there and wait for you to give me an idea of what to do next:: With that, she and her squads disappeared.

::Bart? How many squads did we bring?:

::Four. They're the ones we sent with the judge. It was the fastest way::

::What? You mean I'm naked?:

::No, Ted. You've still got your uniform on:: Bart snickered. He didn't often get such a good opening against his boss, and he was darned if he'd let it pass.

"Captain," Ted said, "is there anything more I can do for you?"

"No, sir. She really is something else, isn't she. Quite well composed for one her age. And to think that she could hold them all off until others could come to help. And a bullet. I've never seen a bullet stopped like that. Like it was shot into gel."

"Yes, I want to know about that, too." Ted was prevaricating. He knew how it stopped. What he wanted to know was how it got that far past her security squads to even reach her shields. "Very well, then. I'll be on my way. Lots to do."

::Ted,:: Mata sent, ::we're back at the office. There's Envoys buzzing around here like angry bees. But they're starting to calm down, some. I'm the reason that the bullet struck her shield. I ordered the squads to let it through. First, and least important, it kept the abilities of the squads somewhat secret, accentuating what Muriel, herself, could do. More important was that it showed where the bullet was aimed. You should see it on TV. They even slow motioned it, so you could see where it came from, who was holding the gun, and where the bullet struck the shield. She never flinched and wasn't deflected a bit. She just casually

turned toward the principal after it hit.::

::Muriel's been on the phone to her parents asking them to come in. She hasn't told them why. And the squads I sent out are reporting that they've got her parents car surrounded. They should be here in a few minutes. We've got a possible place picked out for them. Once they get here, Muriel will take them over to it and get their approval. Or we'll find another place for them. Whatever. Once the place is selected, Muriel thinks it would be good if her parents saw how a place is remodeled to suit them. I agree. Their input will definitely make them more comfortable with staying in Enclave for a while. Can you think of anything we've missed?::

::Not right off hand. Will someone meet them at the entrance?::

::Already covered. The squads will bring them in,:: Mata replied. ::OK, we'll see you when you get here.::

Moments later, Muriel got the news that her parents had arrived. It took some explaining to get her parents to understand that there was a real reason for bringing them in. The situation was worse than originally believed. State wanted Muriel. They wanted her as a weapon, or wanted her out of the picture. They had suspected her potential to be involved with the Envoys, somehow, and had moved one of their people into the position of principal to try to break her down at school. Both State's attempt to arrest her, and thereby take her out of the picture, and the attempt to show her as incompetent at school had failed badly. State would now try more severe methods, up to and including trying to make her an orphan.

The stopped by Ted's office (which Muriel didn't even know he had inside the Enclave) and filled out papers naming the Envoy Enclave and Home, collectively, as the ones to take guardianship in case of the loss of her parents. They readily agreed, after seeing the blossoming of their daughter after the Envoys' intervention. Other options were offered, but her parents realized that other friends and relatives wouldn't understand her connection to the Envoys. Then they went house-hunting.

Mata had done her research well. Having seen where Muriel and they lived, she had had the house duplicated in place of one that was vacant. All that would be required is any upgrades they wanted and moving their furniture in. They were fascinated by the way the squads worked to make improvements that made the house more attractive and functional. They were also promised that, when the current situation was ended and they could go back home, the same improvements would be made to their existing structure. Then the furniture arrived. The shock of it suddenly appearing in the rooms caused them to laugh at the ease with which the Envoys worked.

In short order everything was in place, and her parents settled in. Ted arrived at about the same time and Muriel, changed back to her "normal" shirt and jeans, met him at the door.

"Mr. and Mrs. White, thank you for being so understanding about this. We apologize. We didn't know how deeply the Secretary of State had his hooks into things. Since we'd gotten the original treaty and the assurance that your daughter would be accepted as an

Envoy diplomat, we had no knowledge of his feelings. It wasn't until he showed up, Saturday noon, with the papers that we began to discover our error. Even so, we still haven't discovered all the contacts and resources he could use." Ted was almost stammering, getting all that out. But he stopped when Muriel's father stood up and came toward him.

"Sir," he said, "you've helped our daughter gain confidence in herself, and she's blossomed under it. I see her accomplishing things I didn't think were possible, and interacting with her squads and others as an adult. Yet she's only 12. You've helped her, protected her, nurtured her personality far beyond what we could do as much as we tried. We should be thanking you."

"It's really no problem to us," said Ted. "And we've got lots of resources to draw on to help her. I would suggest that you get to know Fran, your security chief. Like your daughter's Mata, she's an organizer. If there's something you want that you can't find here, tell her and she'll either find it, make it, or have someone go get it. While you're here food, clothing and entertainment are free. That's the least we could do for inconveniencing you. Your squads will also act as "gophers" for you, just as they do for your daughter. As for protection, very often you won't even know that they're around. Muriel seems to like to have them visible more. But I, and possibly you, might find that a bit overwhelming. They will not intrude on your privacy in any way. Muriel's squads have gone a long way to training them in that. So have mine. As for your security chief, Fran, all you need to do is say her name, and she'll come. Why don't you try it, so you'll understand how it works."

Mrs. White looked at her husband. He simply nodded slightly. So she said, "Fran."

"Yes, Mrs. White." And there she was, standing beside Ted. "Oh, it's so good to finally meet you both. Ted, you didn't tell me how much fun this could be. Mr. and Mrs White, I've got 2 squads going over your normal house. We won't change the decor unless you tell us to, or when you feel that what's here is comfortable to you. But we can repair wiring, plumbing, walls and such. Strengthen the structure. Check out things like roof and heating and air conditioning. When this is over, you'll be able to move back in with no worries. Well, except maybe one. What to do with us. We'll stay on as your security, but hopefully you will no longer really need us for that. We'll still be "gophers", though. We're good at digging for things."

"Oh, my" Muriel's mother started looking faint, and several things happened at once. Her father reached to support her, Muriel stepped behind her to help keep her from falling, and Fran mentally shouted, ::MARK:: while moving to Mrs. White's other side.

Fran's mental burst had shown Mark not only where they were, but what was happening, so when he appeared in the room he was already reaching for Mrs. White. In seconds, Mrs. White's color returned to her face, though she still looked a bit shocked.

"Let's move you to the couch, ma'am. That's it. Just sit and relax for a couple of minutes. Mr. White, perhaps you'd join your wife and lend your support. Oh, dear, this really isn't the way to be introduced to people. My name is Mark, and I'm what passes for a doctor in Enclave. Envoy methods of doctoring are quite a bit different from those of human doctors.

Ah, here we go,” he said, holding Muriel's mother's hand. “Nothing seriously wrong. Just a bit overwhelmed, I think.” ::Fran, you're fast, girl. And sent just the right information. I still think you would have made a good doctor.:: “Some people might call what I do 'faith healing'. Nothing could be further from the truth. I simply can find what's wrong and correct it without all the physical stuff that human doctors have to go through.”

“Very often, with humans, it requires a touch. Most humans can't accept a mental connection. Well, actually they can, but they've told themselves they can't, and that blocks it. So I usually try to touch a shoulder or hold a hand, like I'm doing now. Then no further touch is necessary, because I get all the information I need directly from that contact. You're fine, now, Mrs. White. Lily? Oh, dear. I must make sure that I DON'T parrot that old joke. You're OK now, Lily. You just needed a bit of strengthening and balance. You've had a long day with quite a few shocks. I imagine that Fran's appearing when you spoke her name was just enough to tip the balance.”

“All I could think,” said Mrs. White, “was that I had my own private jinn. Then things started to go white.”

“I'm sure. But that shouldn't happen again, now.” Mark turned toward Muriel's father and said, “Mr. White, I'm Mark.” He held his hand out as if to shake it, and without thinking Muriel's father took it. “You were very quick to respond to your wife. That was good, it helped support her until we could get her set down. Just the thing. Yes, indeed. You have a remarkably strong constitution, sir. You've taken the shocks you've received without any serious imbalance.”

::Ted,:: Fran sent, ::we've got to work on not overwhelming people quite so much. We're throwing words at them the way we throw thoughts at each other. Can someone look into how we can ramp that down?::

::Interesting thought. I've thrown it out to some of the brains in Home. We'll see what they come up with.::

“You're not wearing the same uniform that the other Envoys wear,” said Mr. White.

“You're right. Envoys, as a whole, don't need doctors. But here in the Enclave, we have people that are either employees, guests like you two, or visitors. And accidents happen, illnesses catch up with people, all sorts of things can happen. And people respond better to someone who at least appears to be a doctor. So I modeled mine after what human doctors wear. It makes them more comfortable and doesn't hurt me a bit. Makes me stand out a little, which isn't necessarily bad.”

“Now, I've strengthened both of you, and made some minor changes to help you feel better. But it's going to take a couple of days for them to fully settle in. Just relax and behave normally, don't try to push past what you feel you can do. You'll feel more energetic in many ways, little problems that you had are cured. No more aches and pains that you thought you had to endure. In time, you'll notice that you seem to have toned up a bit. It's all part of the balance. You'll definitely feel younger.”

Mr. and Mrs. White looked at each other, then looked at Muriel. It took a great effort for Muriel to not laugh.

“Mom, would it be alright if I tried out my apartment? I've never had anything like it, before, and, well, I'd kinda like to see how it fits me.”

“You'll have at least one squad with you?” At Muriel's nod, she continued, “Well, that's alright then. Just no wild parties. No sense in getting into bad habits. Oh, can anyone in your squads cook? You haven't had lunch, yet.”

“I'm sure that if they can't they can find something for me. I'll be fine. Thanks, mom. I'll see you tomorrow, then.” ::Mata, get me out of here! Before I giggle and give it all away::

“I think it's time for the rest of us to leave, too. I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. White would like to settle in. Fran . . . ,” Ted said.

“No sweat, Ted. We can cook and take care of whatever chores need to be done. And we know how to set up security that's discrete and allows them the privacy they need.”

Chapter 7

Home Away from Home (Monday afternoon)

"Oh, my gosh!" Muriel said as they entered the apartment. "When mom and dad looked at me I thought I'd bust out laughing."

"I may be a bit obtuse, but what happened?" Mata asked.

"I may not know the mechanics, but I know the indications. Mom and dad haven't been able to really be together for a long time, now. Mom has cancer . . ."

"Not any more," Mata interrupted, "If I followed what Mark did."

"And dad had some problem that made it impossible for him to do anything like that."

"Again, not if I followed what Mark did. And before you ask, any time I'm around Mark when he's working I tap in to see how he does it. They're over all of that, and given more strength, and toned up and balanced. They'll feel years younger than they actually are. Hmm. I see why you felt like you were going to explode. They saw an opportunity that they hadn't had for a long time, and were wondering what to do with you. Yes, you did well to suggest your coming to the apartment. But you're not used to being alone. Is there anything I can do to make that easier for you?"

"You know," Muriel said, "that's one thing we left out of the office. Some place for people to sleep. If at least one squad is going to be here, they'll need some place to crash."

"No they won't. Those break-room chairs make great bunks. They fully recline. And Envoys don't need sleep either. Come to that, we don't need to eat, either. But many of us do and enjoy it. We picked it up from you dirty humans," Mata said with a grin. "Which brings us to lunch. If we can't whip something up from your kitchen then two things will happen. First, we can get anything you want from the restaurants here in Enclave. And the second is that I'll pound on a few Envoys until the kitchen is stocked correctly."

"Would I be out of line to invite whoever is on duty to have meals with me, sometimes?"

"Not at all, and before you ask, yes, we all enjoy food. Now you know why your dining room table is so big. Well, one of the reasons. The other is that it makes a good conference room if we all need to brainstorm something. And . . . the word is out. Prepare to be inundated," Mata said with a grin.

A strange sound attracted Muriel's attention. "What's that? Wait a minute! Where are the stairs?"

"We realized when your parents were here that stairs would be a handicap to some people. That's why we translated them directly up and down. Even Ted agreed. So we pulled the stairs out and put in an elevator. It has it's own power source, so even if the electricity goes out over the whole state, It and your lights and such will still operate. And here comes the ravening horde."

"Mata, I can see one thing we need to improve on, if we're going to use this area for brainstorming. Some sort of privacy screen for Muriel's bedroom." One of the squad looked toward that end of the apartment. "Maybe soundproofed, too."

"If you mean soundproofing from downstairs, that's been done. And if she isn't involved in the think-tank stuff, then we do it downstairs," replied Mata. "Same with cooking for the squads. Downstairs unless we're invited. This is her space."

"OK, but what about when she invites officials or whatever up to talk?"

"Hmm. I think most of that can be done in her office casual area. We set up isolation baffle shields around the area so the squads wouldn't disturb her work, but she could still join in when she wanted to."

"You two DO know that I'm right here, don't you?" Muriel said with some exasperation. "How about asking me?"

"Oops . . . ," Mata actually blushed. "Sorry, Muriel. What do you think."

"When I'm up here alone, I don't want anything blocking me from going from one end to the other directly. But if others are up here, I don't see that they need to see where I sleep. Is there a way of setting up some sort of movable partition?"

"Sliding doors, like in gyms. They fold up into pockets. They're on rails top and bottom," said the squad mate. "We can even make them move silently."

"Sounds like a possibility," Muriel said with some doubt.

"Decorated. A continuation of what's on the walls, maybe?" added Mata.

"Yea, that sounds better," replied the squad mate.

"Maybe," Muriel said. "I think we can improve on that, though. Hmm. We don't want grooves in the floor. It would make cleaning more difficult. And we don't want something that would break up the decoration, like folding doors. Think more space-age or science fiction. Well, that's for later. Just something to think about."

"Well, while you three have been doing all that heavy thinking, the rest of us have been actually working," another of the squad said, with a chuckle. "Lunch's on. And if I don't miss my guess, Muriel, you had very little breakfast. So let's see if we make good enough cooks."

"I'm going to ask what is probably a ridiculous question to a bunch of people that just knock on each others mental doors, but . . .," Muriel got no further.

"Phone!" Mata face palmed. "We had it for you Saturday, and never got it to you. Wait a minute. OK who has it?" Quietly, the phone was passed from hand to hand up to the head of the table. Muriel had balked at being placed in an 'important' place, until she understood that she was acting as the representative of the head of a nation. So she ranked anyone that might sit at that table. Especially the squads.

"This is charged against the Enclave, so you can use it as much as you want," Mata said.

"You mean that I should use it only for Enclave business." Muriel said it as a statement, not a question.

"No," replied Mata. "You should use it anytime you want, and for whatever purpose. We know you have friends that you've missed talking to over the past few days. Your mental health is as important to us as your physical health is. So, since this is only lunch time, you should be able to talk to at least a few of your friends before they have to go to bed. And you, too, of course."

"Of course," Muriel replied, dryly. "I suppose you're going to tuck me in, too. Maybe we should change your title to Chief of Staff."

"Well, I suppose I can. I could also change your diapers, youngling." This from a person that claimed to be a male 600 million years old and looked like a 12 year old girl. The squad was polite enough to keep it to a muffled snicker. "As for Chief of Staff – yea, you could call me that, or probably any number of other names I'm sure you've got on the end of your tongue, which, if spoken, would cause your mother to wash it. Really, Security Chief is probably the best one, though. It's the one I do the most. The rest is just hobbies and make-work."

"Then I could use it to call my friends?"

"Of course. Sam? You did put their numbers in the contacts, didn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," a squad mate halfway down the table said.

There was suddenly silence from the whole table. No clatter of silverware on plates, no quite chatter between seat mates. Nothing. It was like time stopped, and all heads turned to Muriel.

"Oops." Sam, at least, had the courtesy to look ashamed. "I just stuck my foot in it, didn't I?"

"Mata, I won't call you out in front of the squads. But we need to talk. NOW!"

"I'll talk. But it should be in front of the squads. No, we didn't probe. Yes, we do have information on you, but it was done by investigation. We've known who your friends were for a long time. Even tailed them, which resulted in our being able to get the phone numbers. Muriel, I promised you in the beginning that all we had was a surface link. That's all any of us, including Ted, have. The squads knew about the investigation. Many of them helped with it. You happen to have some very dedicated and protective friends that care about you an awful lot. And we know that they missed you Friday night and Saturday. Sunday you were too beat to call them, and Monday has been a disaster looking for the spot marked 'X'. And we let you and them down by not giving you the phone before now. Now, if you want to fire me, I'll understand. I just want you to do it for the right reason."

"No . . .," Muriel said. "No, you're not fired. That would be letting you off too easy. You stay and work for me. You might even find that to be a worse punishment. After all, you'll have to put up with my baby-talk." A quiet, collective sigh came from around the table, and people went back to eating.

"Especially when I invite all my friends to come to Enclave to see where I work and see my apartment. REAL 12 year old kids that make you imitation ones look like old fuddy-duddies. And will probably drive you crazy. Kinda like herding kittens. And guess who will be in charge of their security." Muriel smiled. It looked somewhat shark-like.

Suddenly, the table was quiet again. "Um, couldn't we discuss this?" Mata asked. At the slow shake of Muriel's head, Mata turned to the rest of the table and asked, "Anyone want to be security chief?" Above every squad member's head was a sign that said:

>CRICKETS<

Above Muriel's head appeared a bright, flashing, red one that said:

>SCORPIEN<

And everybody laughed.

"Seriously, now, Muriel, the phone is a standard phone that's been a bit modified. You can link to it mentally. That way it can reach you and you can reach it even from a "no pocket". Also, that way you can talk on the phone without anyone knowing. Even in class." There was a chuckle from the table. "Which you might have to do if you get called in for some reason, and we can't reach you mentally for some reason. Technically, that should only happen if you block contact, yourself. So, this is kinda a backup plan. We may want to test the theory, some, though."

"Sounds good. After lunch will you show me how to do it? I'll call a couple of friends in the process and see how it works."

"There is something else I should probably tell you," Mata said. "Technically, you're working for the Enclave and Home. Ted told me this morning that the paperwork was approved for you to be home-schooled and tutored by us. But the 'working for us' bit has had various bureaucracies in fits. It's been sorted out, now. You're on the payroll. Money will be deposited in an account for you, but you can't touch it until you're of age. The fact that we're providing food, clothing and shelter puts a lid on it having to be put in the hands of a trustee. If your parents feel that maintenance funds should be supplied, we'll provide them over and

above your salary. That way there won't be any question of their 'mishandling' funds as your trustee. Not that they would. Ted said he'd talk to your parents sometime tomorrow to see how they want to play it. I, personally, don't see that there will be a problem. It helps that your dad retired to take care of your mom. Now, with them both healthy, he may want to go back to work. His privilege, and it won't affect any arrangements we make now. At, I don't know, 18 or 21, whichever they count as 'of age', you'll be personally rich. However, this in no way affects how things are done between us. You won't have to pay for anything from the Enclave or Home, as it's normally supplied to employees, free. There may be some paperwork, but the whole thing should be sorted out by tomorrow afternoon."

"You know," Muriel said, "this is one of the things I like about having a Security Chief. Things get done. Details get covered without my having to try to figure out where I'm screwing up. Thanks, Mata."

"My job," Mata replied. "But you're welcome. One thing nice about working for you, you don't take things for granted. You thank people for the job they do. Even when you put us in our place for hiding things from you," she added, with a grin. "I'll try not to let that happen again."

"Which is a polite way of saying that I came down too strong on you."

"No," replied Mata. "It's a polite way of saying you treated me as an adult to an adult. You're still surprising me in many ways. And were much gentler on me than I've seen from bosses in the human world. Not only that, but you turned it into a banter to take the sting out of it. It wasn't that we were intentionally hiding the fact that we investigated you and your friends. We weren't. But the way you received the information was just plain wrong. We should have let you know before. You'd probably have passed it off as normal and reasonable. The fact that we didn't made it look like we were hiding something and got caught. That was what was wrong."

"We need to talk about your fourth and fifth strips," Mata continued.

"Wait, fifth stripe? I thought there were only four. That's all Ted has."

"I know. He's got some unresolved issues that keep him out of balance. He knows it. But if you get your fifth one then technically you'll rank him. That's why we need to talk."

"It's simple," said Muriel. "I don't get one until he does. Period. Tell that to whoever you need to. I cannot and will not accept a fifth until he has his."

"Actually, that makes things simpler. But we still need to figure out how to get him balanced. He works alright as he is. There's nothing wrong with his thinking. But whatever it is nags at him and makes him a bit defensive in some areas. To be blunt, I'm surprised that he's worked as well as he has with you, since that seems to be the area that's sensitive. Young girls. You've certainly made an impression on him. I don't know if you realize it, but he was there, outside the school gates, talking with the reporter. But you handled the situation by yourself. He let you, because he trusted you and your new-found abilities, untried though

you were.”

“Ah, I see,” Muriel said with a smile. “So I was thrown to the wolves, huh?”

“Actually, no. He was there, and so were his squads. He kept them back when he saw you had the situation in hand. The fact that you contained the bullies from the inside and called the squads to contain them from the outside impressed him. He was more impressed by the calm way you behaved, even when fired on. His squads weren't happy. Ask Bart. They wanted in, and they wanted to take the bullies apart. And when you were fired on they wanted to bottle the principal and teachers up. They didn't like the idea that someone would fire on you at all. I think it's the closest any Envoy has come to a killing rage. I'll admit, you had your squads scrambling to get everything done. But it was YOU doing it, and you were THEIR boss, and they were proud of you. And, grudgingly, so was Bart. Ted . . . Ted was satisfied that he'd made a good choice. There were about four others, all among your friends, by the way, that could have been selected. You seemed to be the best.”

“OK. The other kids. The ones you think might be able to learn. Should I try to find out who they are, and see about their training? Or just leave it alone?”

“Well, that brings us to your real job,” Mata said. “Yes, if you can spot them, sound them out. Even start their training. We'll keep an eye on it to be sure they get it right, if that worries you. But back to the stripes. The fourth one should be no trouble for you. You need to visit Home, at least once. You can even take the time to meet with your old friend, if you want to. The difficult part is learning how to translate there. It's a little different from translating from one place to another on earth. But not that much, and we'll show you how to do it. And that brings up the fifth stripe. Actually, you already have the requirements. That's something we're keeping from Ted, right now. I don't know how, but you ARE balanced. You took the shock of selection, the training, and being thrust into an adult world better than any of us expected. Especially considering the treatment you've had over the last few years. Formative years, in fact. And we thought that the fifth stripe should be something different. Not just the plane liquid silver of the other four. I was thinking gold”

“No, gem. Like liquid ruby if that's possible. But here's the thing. I think it should also show that Ted and I are on the same page, somehow. There's a knot that old-time sailors used to use for decoration on ships. It's called a Turks Head knot. It's a kind of braiding that locks itself into place. I looked it up when I came across the reference. Maybe something like that where both his color and mine are braided together. Another good reason for me to not get mine until he has his.”

Mata sat back and stared at her for a moment. “Sam? Sammy boy. Turks head knot. Can they be done with two strands? Like different colors?”

“Turks head? Yea, that's a cool knot. Yea, they can be done with two strands of different colors, as long as the material is the same size. Why? OH! Fifth stripe? Really cool. And the individual's color being the outside with the other under it. Sure. Easy. Let me talk to Bart.” He paused for a moment, then said, “yea, he likes the idea, too, and knows what I mean. Now all we need to do is get our recalcitrant one to accept. Then set it up where Ted

and Muriel are together and do them both at the same time. That'll look sharp. We even know what color for Ted. Blue."

"Sam, make it liquid blue sapphire, then," Muriel added.

"Oh, super cool. And make them glow slightly, so they stand out in any kind of light. Yea, we can do that. What's yours?"

"Ruby," Muriel replied.

"Man, he's going to flip when he sees them. I hope it's soon."

"So do I," muttered Muriel. "So do I. Mata, Do I have to make the translation alone? Can I take someone with me?"

"I don't see why not. Who? Oh . . . OH! It's never been done, but I see what you're saying. Let your friends see some of your training, then show them how you pass the test by taking them with you. WOOSH! I'm going to have to talk to some people. Ted included. Maybe Ted, especially. I'll have to get back to you. In the mean time, let's get you set up with your phone, and you can call your friends."

Chapter 8

A Friend, in Need

(Monday evening – Tuesday morning)

Making a call, once the initial connection to the phone was achieved, was as simple as thinking of the persons name, pushing it, and Muriel could hear it ring. She started with one of the ones that would be most worried about the lack of contact, Fran. Well, Francesca, really. But everyone called her Fran. And Muriel learned that the reason that the Envoys used only one name was that there were flavors to who was meant. So Fran, the friend, would be different than Fran, the squad member.

What was even better was that Fran was able to text all the other friends with the invitation, which saved Muriel from potentially having to call all of them, some of them possibly after their bedtime. In moments she had a most emphatic 'YES' from all of them. Moments after that she was able to tell Fran, and hence all her friends, that they would be picked up by an Enclave bus in the morning. The parents had been invited, too. But all of them had declined due to work or other commitments. And all the parents were happy to have them under the watch of Envoy security, free, rather than having to get babysitters that cost money, at the last minute.

To make it more impressive, Ted had gotten permission to run convoy, which meant a lead and chase car, and all using red and blue flashing lights. There was also the Envoy diplomatic flag on both front fenders of the bus. They weren't allowed to run traffic lights, like a full convoy would do under police protection. But at least they were given some deference from traffic. So it was that a very excited Muriel boarded the bus along with ever faithful Mata, and two squads manned the chase cars.

Mata had the route mapped out, so that they could make a circle with the first and last child closest to the Enclave. Pickups were easy, though impressive. The bus would pull up, and the two squads would come boiling out of their respective cars and create a tunnel between the house and the bus entrance, with Muriel at the end of the tunnel closest to the house. Some of the parents just thought it was nice that the kids put on such pomp. Others realized that here was a diplomat of a foreign nation, never mind that she'd almost grown up with their child, escorting little Fran or Bobby to the bus, personally. It raised some eyebrows, and caused quite a few popped eyes. And Muriel loved every minute of it.

It was during the half mile or so from the last pick up to Enclave that they were struck. Muriel just caught a movement from the corner of her eye, and extended the shields even further than the one foot from the skin of the bus. Then the Rocket Propelled Grenade hit the shield and stuck. Muriel pulled the shield in to the normal one foot distance and ordered the three vehicles, mentally, to go full emergency lights, sirens, and to heck with the traffic lights. A third squad, running a close and invisible cover over the convoy reported that they had the shooter and the RPG tube, and were hollering to Ted to find out what to do with them. The bus literally screamed into the Enclave and went directly to Muriel's office.

::Mata, can the office take an explosion?::

::Muriel, it can take an atomic blast::

::Good. Squads! Out, form a corridor and get those kids under cover, fast. Chase cars, as soon as the squads are out, get out of here. Driver,:: she sent to the bus driver, ::I'm not sure I can hold it without being on the bus. If you want to leave until I can be told where to send the RPG, feel free.::

::Muriel, ma'am, I'm sticking as long as you are, and maybe longer. But I think help is on the way.::

Sure enough, Bart showed up with a squad, took one look at the situation, and asked Muriel to hold on a little longer. His squad boarded the bus as he came up beside her.

::Let me feel how you've got it. Ah! Good thinking. As well as sticking the thing without the impact to set it off, you're holding the trigger. Just hang on. I'm going to parallel you. Once I've got it, you can disengage and get under cover, yourself.::

As he was sending to her, she could hear a couple of the boys. One asked what that was beside the bus, and the other told him it was an RPG. At which point everybody moved back away from the windows. She could also feel Bart gently feeling his way around the grenade, setting his shields to match what Muriel had instinctively done, and taking over the shields on the bus.

::OK, Muriel, I want you to disengage just as gently as I took hold. That way, if anything moves I can try to catch it before something bad happens. That's it. NICE! Very delicate. You do good work, all the way around. And if Mata doesn't tell you, the way you kept your head and gave orders was just right. You brought them in safe and hung on until we could take over. We'll take it to an area that Maintenance is building, and see if we can make it safe enough to turn over to the authorities. If not, it's where we can explode it harmlessly. If you hear a loud bang, then you'll know we couldn't make it safe. Thanks, Muriel. It's a pleasure working with you.::

Muriel breathed a sigh of relief, and sent, ::Thanks, Bart. I'm glad you got it. I'd have ridden it in, but I was beginning to run out of ideas as to what to do next. Thanks for taking over.:: She waved and turned to the office as the bus sedately drove away.

Mata was standing at the door with a grin on her face. ::You did it, kid. I've never seen anything better or smoother. Nerves OK? Need a break before dealing with your 'kittens'? You can take one, you know. We're cycling the kids through the bathrooms right now. For some reason, they all felt the need when they found out you were trying to keep an RPG from exploding.:: This was followed by an audible chuckle.

::Thanks, Mata, for taking charge of them. Sorry for dumping them on you.::

::Honey, you were busy. And . . . YES! Bart found how to safe it. It's headed for an F.B.I. compound, along with the shooter. We'll find out who he is and who gave the orders. By the way, Bart is VERY enthusiastic about what you did. He's blasted it all over Enclave, to every Envoy. It's like HE was the one to discover you:: Again, she chuckled. ::And Ted is being very indulgent. Nobody's tried to hold something like that against all the surges and sways of a high-speed run like that, before. You just taught them how. And Ted's impressed::

::OK, it looks like the line for the bathroom has finally ended. And I've caught my breath a bit. Time to go to work::

“OK . . . ,” Muriel addressed the kids, “friends, first I want you to take a look around you. The people you see in gray uniforms are all Envoys. They may look like 12 year old kids, but believe me, they are MUCH older than you are. They've chosen to look that way to help you feel more comfortable. They are some of my security detail. In fact, they're the same people that lined the path to the bus that each of you took, even though they looked like adults at the time. Next to me is Mata, who's my Security Chief. All of them have become my friends in the short time I've known them. Please, if they ask you to do something . . . or NOT do something, Donny,” this got a laugh from the kids, including Donny, “please do what you're told. They're not trying to be nasty, they're trying to keep you and everything around you safe.

“Behind me, on your right, is my office area. Directly behind me is Mata's desk. And on your left is the squad room, where the active squad sits and waits for me to make up my mind what kind of mischief I'm going to get into.” This brought another laugh. Behind you is the squad break-room. As you can see, there are 15 seats there. I can have all 4 squads in here at once if needed. Or if they just want to hang out, there's a place for them. Behind that is a kitchen for snacks and such for the squads.”

::Mata, am I allowed to teach them to link? Or to link to them?::

::Of course. You do know that you can force a link to anyone, don't you?::

::No, but I do now. However, I'm going to see if they can do the same thing that I did: establish the link themselves. If they can, I think they can be trained. Besides, with them linked I can take them directly to my apartment without having to use the elevator in shifts. I think that would give them a kick to translate 'like Envoys'. Did Ted happen to say if I can take them to Home?::

::Yes, but not on your first trip there::

::OK::

“So, the next thing I'd like to do is give you a little test. Nothing traumatic, and it isn't for a grade. Something we're going to do a little later would be much easier if each of you could hear me in your mind, and I hear you in mine. I want to show you how it's done. So, I'm going to ask you to take your seats in the recliners, behind you. This may take a little time, so be patient with me. Oh, yes this is the first thing that I had to learn how to do. So

you'll have a little taste of what I've been going through the last few days, and why I haven't had time to get in contact with you. So go, get your seats, please."

As it turned out, Fran was the first for her to work with. Muriel simply explained the 'reach out and knock on my mental door' concept to her, and she did it. The look on her face when she could hear Muriel in her mind, and knew that Muriel could hear her revitalized Muriel and gave her the courage to go on. As it ended up, most of them could do it with that little training except, of course, poor Donny. But Muriel was patient, and offered Donny a reward if he could do it. Patience and walking him through the instructions a few times worked. He established a link, himself, and was proud as punch.

She went back up to the front of the seating and started to tell them about her apartment.

"Excuse me, Muriel. Can I interrupt a moment? I'd like to meet your friends." Ted walked over to her and turned to the kids. The kids seemed to hold their breaths. This was THE TED. The leader of the Envoys. And he was talking to THEIR Muriel like she was an adult: deferring to her. And he wanted to meet THEM. Muriel grinned to herself. She knew that reaction from personal experience, once she'd learned that her substitute teacher was actually the head of a foreign nation.

Ted walked over to Fran, and held out his hand. "Hi. I'm Ted." Then a funny look came over his face. Shock, followed by a happy grin, and he held her hand for a moment longer. When he released it, he looked at Muriel and asked, "One of the four?" Muriel just shrugged her shoulders. Ted went to the next, and before he could even put out his hand the same look came over his face. All the way around the seating, Ted showed more and more the incredulous look. What sometimes tongue-tied Fran had started, the rest of the kids picked up on, half showing off and half 'tweaking the man' by linking to him. As he turned away from Donny, he just looked at Muriel and said, "ALL TWELVE?"

"Yep. And they initiated the links with me, just as I did with Mata the first time." Then she stuck her tongue out at him, causing both him and the kids to laugh.

"OK, you're definitely cleared. But the first trip you have to make alone, there and back. Mata will parallel you, in case you get in trouble. But you have to show that you can do it alone first. OK?"

"Quite OK. And I understand why. And I'd hope that I'd be paralleled by the squads when I do the other," she replied. Things were moving fast, again. And she'd shown up Ted without really meaning to. But instead of being mad like many adults would, he accepted it as a fact, though an amazing one.

"OK, I promised Donny a reward. Come here, Donny." She pulled a baseball bat out of the air, which had all the kids going, "Oh, WOW!", and handed it to Donny. "Hit me. No base hit stuff. A real home run."

Donny looked puzzled, but she encouraged him. So he swung hard. And the bat

stopped a foot from Muriel. And stuck there.

“Now you know how that RPG stayed where it was. What you just saw is a personal shield. It's stopped five .45 caliber bullets aimed at my heart, which is how I got the first stripe on my sleeve. If any of you decide you want to learn more than just linking mentally, getting to this point is where it would start. But it's tough work. You might decide that you don't want to do it.”

“I'll be showing you a few other things, today, too. The first is my apartment, upstairs. No, I don't stay there all the time. Mostly, I'm with my parents. But if I need to be, I have a place to stay that won't disturb others. Now we COULD all take the elevator. But we won't. I'll take you up there the same way that the Envoys move around, IF,” and she emphasized this, “IF you can all behave and do what I say. It's why I had you link to me. That way we can all do the same thing, together. Come on out here and line up 4 across and three back.”

The kids quickly moved to the area between the squad seating and Mata's desk. Muriel had them link to her, and made sure they could all hear her. Then she took the hands of the two in the center front, and had them take hands with each other so they were all connected. On the word 'NOW' they all took one step forward to Muriel's one step back, and found themselves in a different place. Mata had joined them in parallel, monitoring to see how Muriel did it, and making sure there were no problems.

“Oh, wow,” and “That's neat,” rang out around the group.

“Behind me is my bedroom. That's the front of the building. Now, remember, we were cross-ways to the building downstairs. It doesn't matter what way we're facing when we translate. What matters is knowing where we're going, and how we want to be facing when we get there. There's a reason I did it this way. In a little while I'm going to get some more training. Then I'm going to disappear for a little bit. When I come back, I'll take you where I just went. Do you want to know where we'll be going?”

“YES!” came the collective shout.

“We'll be going to Home. To the place the Envoys come from. I have to do it alone, first, go and come back to show that I can do it. Home is in another dimension, and I have to learn how to find it – get a visualization of where I should come out – learn how to check that the area is clear and will stay clear for me to enter it. And then do the same thing coming back. Once I've done that, I can take you with me.”

“Where we're standing is the great room. The living area, to be exact. Behind you is my dining room table, big enough to hold me and all four squads, 22 people. That's because sometimes I like company. And sometimes we might have to have conferences. Behind that is the kitchen and bathroom and elevator, same place as the ones downstairs. Would you like to go downstairs now? So you can see me get some more training?”

The 'YES' was a little more ragged this time, and not quite as loud. But they eagerly linked hands with her and each other, and took the step that put them back where they were

in the office. Muriel slowly grinned at them. "See," she said, "you can do what you're told, sometimes. Now, let me get trained. Mata will be training me, and it might not look like much, but we'll be doing it through a mental link. Then you'll watch Mata and I disappear, and come back. Then it will be your turn to go with me."

Muriel turned to Mata. They just seemed to stare at each other for a bit, then Muriel turned around and the two walked into nothing. Five minutes went by, and they hadn't returned. Even Ted looked concerned. At seven minutes, they returned, and Muriel was grinning from ear to ear.

"Sorry, I met someone, and she agreed to wait for me to come back," Muriel said.

"Before you go," Mata said, "there's one piece of business we need to take care of. Hold up your arms." When she did, three stripes became four stripes. And all the kids could see it. "You passed your test. Very easily and very well done. Now, you can continue."

"Not yet," said another voice. "Ted, come here." Bart was standing by Muriel. Ted moved over toward her. "Put your arms up. Both of you. Don't argue, Ted. Just do it." They put their arms up, and suddenly there were braided knots in red and blue centered between their paired strips. "NOW you can continue," Bart said with a grin. "And you can blame Muriel for the design. But I think she's right."

Ted turned to her and stuck out his tongue. "Beast, minx," he said.

"Slave driver, tyrant," she replied and stuck her tongue out at him. "Oh, don't get me giggling. I'll never stop, and we'll never get Home."

"OK. Would it be alright if I came along, too?" he asked.

"Definitely. It's your right, after all." She turned to her friends and held out her hands. "Wait for it. Someone or something is in the landing zone. Let me see . . . Now!" And they were gone.

Chapter 9

A Man's Reach Should Exceed His Grasp (Tuesday morning and afternoon)

They entered Home to view a full-blown argument in action.

"I asked you what you thought you were doing here," a male Envoy said.

"Waiting for your boss," said a young girl.

"And I'm here," said Muriel.

"What? What? What? What is all this, and what do you mean that you're my boss?" the Envoy asked.

Muriel just held up an arm, showing the stripes that encircled her sleeve near the cuff, while Ted said, "Try to keep up, Clyde. Muriel not only passed all the tests, she proved balanced even before I was." He held up an arm to display the stripes on his sleeve. "She brought some friends to show them where the Envoys come from. And what do you do but try to brow-beat another friend of hers. I'll see you in my office. Now." Ted and Clyde disappeared at the same time. Muriel got the feeling that Clyde didn't have a choice in leaving.

"LOTTA!" a cry rang out from behind her as Muriel looked to the younger girl. "I told you I'd bring them," she said, and the girl was mobbed by Muriel's friends. "I'm sorry it took so long, but I was given my last two stripes. Then we had to wait for the area to clear. I take it he was the reason it wasn't clear. Something tells me he may be getting the worst duty in Home, now."

"Who was that guy?" Lotta asked.

"Clyde is one of the ones that wishes things were back to the way they were, before," Mata said, sadly. "He's been kept on some of the worst details there are, here, because he pissed Ted off once too many times. Now . . . now I don't know what will happen to him. But I don't think it will be good. He should have recognized Muriel's uniform. He's seen Ted's enough times. And he insists on wearing those tacky robes instead of real clothes or uniforms. He won't go near the humans, here, at all. Says that they don't know their place. He may not have a place, now, himself."

"Wait! You mean there are other humans, here?" asked one of Muriel's friends that left the throng.

"Well, Lotta's here. And you know what happened to her," said Muriel.

“Yea, she died in an accident. Wait, what? You mean this is where people go when they die?”

“Yep. They come here, get comforted. Get retrained if they want to go back in a new body. You kids, and I, are the only ones in a very long time that have come here without dying. And we'll be able to return, which none of the others ever did. And you'll be able to talk about what you see. You may not be believed, but you'll be able to tell people. The one great mystery. What happens when you die,” Muriel said, seriously, quietly, and a bit sadly. “Maybe someday you'll learn more about it. That depends on you. Each of you. It takes a lot of training. I got rammed through fast, because of the conflict going on around me and the Enclave. But now I'm a full diplomat. In fact, I'm an ambassador for Home and the Envoys to America, yet I'm still a citizen of America. Weird, isn't it.”

“Yea. So, what does an ambassador do?”

“Well, Donny, in my case it's find people that can be trained, and offer them the opportunity. It's not something people have to do. But you've seen some of the benefits of learning,” Muriel said. She almost said “here, little fishy. Take the nice bait.” But she restrained herself and just smiled at him.

“Do we get to wear uniforms?”

“In time, when you pass your first tests. And they're tough. But the Envoys will help. And so will I.”

“KEWL!” Even Mata laughed at that one.

“Um. Miss Muriel”

“Clyde. It's just Muriel. Like Ted, here I only have one name.”

“What are you doing here, buster. You made our friend upset. And you had no right. SHE was doing what she was told to do. And you . . . you with your fat mouth tried to make her go away. It was Muriel that told her to stay. You had NO right to say anything to Lotta, much less act the way you did. Have you ever stopped 5 bullets aimed at your heart? Or stopped one aimed at your head? Or pushed bullies away from you? Or stopped an RPG a foot away from a moving bus, and held it there while the bus was moving fast, in and out of traffic, to get back to the Enclave where someone else could take over and make it safe? And now you come crawling back and can't even call her by her proper name? What the hell do you want?”

Muriel had started to say something, but Mata stopped her. She saw Ted standing a ways behind Clyde, just watching and listening. Clyde, on the other hand, was bright red. Whether with anger or shame was hard to tell, but Muriel thought it was the latter.

“No, sir,” Clyde said. “That's why I'm here. To learn. You're right, sir. I was out of line. I'm sorry. I'd like to apologize to you and to your friend. All your friends. And sir, if you could

see your way to, perhaps you could teach me what it is to be human. Maybe it would help make me a better person.”

His rage over, Donny didn't quite know what to say. “I don't know. You'd have to ask Muriel. And ask her how you should go about it. If she says yes, then maybe I could help you learn. But she has to say yes first.” Donny turned away and went back to Lotta.

“Clyde,” Muriel spoke softly, “I don't know what Ted said. But I can tell you this. Home doesn't need your attitude. I can guess that he gave you a choice. Apologize and learn, or you're gone. Soul death. You would no longer exist at all. No more chance to interact with others. No more chance to learn. Literally non-existence. So, I'll give you a chance. You still have to apologize to Lotta and the others. That's where it starts. Then you become a kid. 12 years old. Learn what it's like to be a kid, and the things they go through. Then you might understand why being a bully just doesn't make it with them. They've seen TOO much of that. And it took me to end it.”

She paused for breath, then added, “You notice I didn't say that you should apologize to me. That's because I wouldn't accept it. The ONLY way you'll gain my forgiveness is to prove yourself. Prove that you can learn. Prove that you can change. Otherwise, I'll send you back to Ted. Do you understand?”

“Yes ma'am. I'm sorry. I mean, I know you won't accept my apology. And I AM sorry I put you in this position. If you'll let me, I'd like to come back with you.”

“See my Security Chief,” Muriel pointed with her thumb to the 'little girl' standing next to her. Mata looked at Clyde, then grew and aged. Then changed again to male.

“Matthew?”

“Yep,” he said, then changed back. “But now it's Mata, and I'm learning to be human and be a female. More difficult than what you will be expected to do. Come over here and we'll talk. Let Muriel go talk with her friends.

Muriel went over to her friends, so she missed whatever Mata had to say to Clyde. Whatever it was, it must have been effective. When she gathered her friends and everyone said goodbye to Lotta, she found a strange boy with Mata. He was dressed in casual clothes and was about 12 years of age. Then it hit her. Mata had made Clyde change into a kid.

Donny must have known right away, somehow. He walked up to the kid and said, “Hi. I'm Don. You coming with us?”

“Yes,” said Clyde. Then Don got a strange look on his face, like when he had finally linked to Muriel. And Clyde got a surprised look, then smiled. So did Don.

Mata came over to Muriel and said, “Well, that went well. Better than I had hoped. I'll take him back. He's not allowed to use any power that all the other kids don't have first. Ted's going to enroll him in the same school with the others, and will watch his progress for a

while. All you have to do is teach those that are willing to learn. Clyde may get picked on, some, in school. But it's the best way for him to learn what it's like to be human. Immersion technique. He'll either learn or drop out. Even if he decides to drop out, he will have learned something. I'm not sure how far Ted will go. I never am. He doesn't surprise me as often as you do, but sometimes it's close on HOW he'll surprise me. Ready to take them back?"

"Yep," Muriel said. "Lotta's going through a tough decision. I may come back from time to time to talk with her. She's been lonely for the past year. Really missed the kids. Really enjoyed their coming, today, and is sad to see them go. But she knows there's a chance she'll see them again, if they can progress that far. Talk about incentive. Well, let's go. Do we need to notify Ted?"

"No, I'm right behind you," he said in her ear. Muriel jumped. Then growled something that sounded like 'beast'.

The trip back was remarkably uneventful. The kids behaved and lined up on Muriel with none of the jostling she expected, and grabbed her hands and waited patiently for the 'NOW' command. They landed, not back in the office but in the apartment, and were told to sit at the table. Muriel ordered Ted to take the head of the table with a "You. Sit." which set the kids to laughing, again. Muriel took the foot. The kids took most of one side, and squad mates filled out the rest of the seats.

Food had been gathered from one of the restaurants. The sort of stuff that kids would enjoy, not the fancier restaurants. The kids seemed to like it, since there wasn't anything left when they finished. And then they found out why the early lunch. BOY! Did they find out. Those who wanted to continue training would be taught. Muriel would do the teaching, and squad mates would help by monitoring and making suggestions as necessary. With that, they went from only being able to link, to finding their power and creating their own shields. Muriel retrieved her baseball bat from a 'no pocket' that made all the kids laugh. Then she tested the shields by having the kids come up one at a time and get walloped with the bat. She apologized for not using a gun, but she said she was tired of all the noise. That got more laughter.

Then it was time. Muriel polled Ted and Mata, and Bart who had shown up with the food, and they all agreed. So a section of the great room was partitioned off with curtains for the boys, Bart and Ted, and Muriel took the girls to her bedroom and explained about how to create clothes. She then produced backpacks in gray with Envoy Enclave Embassy emblazoned on them and told the girls to take off their clothes and put them in the backpacks. She then had the girls examine Mata's uniform for style and fit. Most of them got it right on the first try. Only a couple need to make further adjustments. Muriel then had them 'disappear' the uniforms and re-apply them, so they'd know how it was done.

Ted sent to her to hold them up a minute. So they waited, chatting, until Ted called them back to the great room. The temporary curtains were gone and the boys were all in gray uniforms and backpacks like the girls but fit to a boy's figure. They looked very proud of what they'd done. Little did they know.

Ted called them to order and asked them to come up one at a time. It only took one kid for the rest to realize what was happening. As her friends moved up to Ted, he put the stripes on sleeves, collar and pants seam, then directed them to go stand with Muriel. They quietly lined up behind her as if they'd practiced it, watching their friends get their first stripes. You could see the difference. The kids walked taller without being cocky. They weren't out to take on the world. But they also weren't going to take getting picked on again. Don (no longer Donny, now that he had declared himself) and Clyde were the last two, and Clyde looked about ready to cry. As an Envoy, he'd never tried creating his own clothes and had just kept to the robe. But his time watching the kids and seeing their enthusiasm at learning basic skills had taught him something. Something he had lacked, and was just beginning to get. A sense of accomplishment.

"OK," Muriel said. "It's nearly time for you to go home. Practice making some of your own clothes, if you want. Or we can do more of that tomorrow, unless the school board has figured out how to divide a whole school up among the other schools."

Ted shook his head, no. "Not until next Monday at the earliest."

"OK, so if you want, we can have you back here, tomorrow, too," Muriel added.

"Just one thing," she continued. "Now that you've got your uniforms, wear them when you come. Oh, and one other thing: you're not going home by bus." This was met by general laughter. "And we'll pick you up the same way we take you home this afternoon. You'll get some more chances to practice partner translations. I've had my squads popping in and out of the area of each of your homes, so they know where to deliver you, and where to pick you up tomorrow."

"I'd also like to say that you have shown my faith in Muriel as a teacher to be justified," Ted said, "and I am proud of her and of each of you for what you have accomplished." This brought on a cheer that lasted over a minute. "So, this is how we'll do it. First, we'll check in with your parents to be sure they're ready for you. Or at least as ready as can be expected of such a wild bunch of yayhoos." This brought laughter. "Then we'll send each of you with one of Muriel's security squads for direction to take you home. Obviously, we don't have enough squads to send everybody, so you'll go in whatever order we get confirmation from your parents. One of the squad will assure them that you'll be picked up, tomorrow, the same way and brought here."

"Feel free to talk about anything you've seen and done. You may not be believed. Don't let it get you down if that happens. It's very hard to convince people that such things exist. But to hear that you actually did it might stretch their credibility. You know you did it. That's the point. And you'll do more tomorrow, if you're game." This brought another cheer.

The deliveries went off without a hitch. Kids were taken out 4 at a time, and three trips finished the day. And it was only 3:00 PM. Muriel took a moment to recharge her power. She'd relied on it pretty heavily, and worn herself down some.

Ted just looked at her and shook his head. "12 at one time. 13 counting Clyde. I

expected you to find the four that I found, and work on them. And use their progress as a goad to get the others in, if they could. But 12 making the link by themselves right off the bat. I about fell over when I'd realized what you'd done. You've definitely earned your stripes. And you, Mata. You're right. I'm a beast and a cad and should be lynched for getting you into this. But you held up. You've backstopped Muriel every step of the way, taking care of details that she didn't or wouldn't think to need to do. The two of you are a good team."

"You've got to count the squads, too," Mata said. "They took to the freewheeling 'what can we do now' type of situations like they had practiced them for years. They had the kids off the bus and into the office just as soon as the doors opened. It was almost like they'd translated them there. I know they didn't, but there wasn't a doubt in their minds what needed to be done. Same with doing the office and apartment. They just dove in and did it, and seemed to know what Muriel would like."

"Ted," Muriel said, "What are we going to do with Clyde. He doesn't have parents or a home here to go to. And being Envoy, he's going to have nothing to do until morning."

"My problem," he replied. "He's staying with me. Oh, don't worry, I won't eat him alive. He did very well once we got him down here, and I think he's as proud of wearing a uniform of his own making as the rest are. He's certainly proud of the stripe. That was a good job, by the way. Getting them all protected and into uniforms the first day."

"Yea, well it seems to me that someone I know managed to do it to me in one morning." She chuckled.

"Yea, but I only had one to do, and I had Mata's help. You did 12 at once, and mixed gender, and an added curmudgeon of an Envoy to boot. You know, he was encouraging Don all the way, and asking him how to do things from time to time. They were NOT the reason I had to stall you. One of the other boys managed to lose focus and bungled it. It took three of us to get him out of it. But he got it on the next try. That's quite a group of friends you have. I pity anyone trying to bully one of them, with the example you set. That bully will end up making a fool of himself, and will probably have to change schools." And Ted chuckled just thinking about that happening.

"Why don't you take a break for the rest of the day. Go visit your parents and try to psych out whether it's safe to going back to staying with them." Ted smiled, knowingly. It was obvious that he knew why Muriel had opted to stay in the apartment the night before. Muriel smiled back. But she opted to call first, instead.

It turns out that was wise. Her mother was happy to hear from her. So was her dad. But they seemed preoccupied. Distracted. And they giggled a lot. So, when Muriel asked if they would prefer her to stay at the apartment for a while, her mother said, "of course, dear. We both know how important your work is. We'll miss you, of course, but if you really must stay for a few days, we'll understand. We love you, dear." The message was as clear as a bell. Ted just laughed when she told him.

"You'll understand, someday," Ted said.

“Oh, I understand now. Sometimes I think that parents are worse than kids.”

Chapter 10

Evidence is Found (Wednesday Morning)

The next day the squads picked up the kids the same way they'd dropped them off the night before. Parents were impressed, both with the method of transportation and the new-found confidence the kids expressed. The security on them might have been over-kill, but it at least eased Muriel's mind that there'd be no recurrences of attack on them as they left the houses. Over each pickup squad was an invisible flying squad checking for snipers, RPGs or any evidence of interference. Nothing was seen and nothing happened. And the kids fairly bounced off the walls like they were on a sugar high when they arrived.

Ted's Security Chief did note that there was a helicopter flying around the Enclave, just outside the no-fly zone mandated by treaty. It took an Envoy flying invisible to get the number off the helicopter, and Ted called it in to the FAA. It came back as being a State Department vehicle, with no flight plan filed. Ted asked Bart to keep an eye on it.

Ted had just entered Muriel's office when the attack came. Five rockets arrived almost simultaneously. As soon as they were launched, Bart seized the chopper and killed the engines and all communication, including cell phones, from the vehicle. The rockets had stopped one foot from the door and about 8 feet up. Had they continued, they would have just ducked under the ceiling of the office. Ted was furious. He called the President and insisted that he, personally come investigate the incident.

When the President balked, Muriel said, "enough is enough. Mata, you and one squad with me. Be prepared to be fired upon."

"What do you think you're going to do?" Ted asked.

"Watch. And take care of the kids. Don't move a thing." Then she and the squad were gone. Five minutes later they returned. With unwilling guests. Muriel landed the President and two Secret Service officers in the street, outside the office.

"Can you identify these missiles? I can. And so can anybody watching TV. Those are American." She grabbed the President's arm and they launched vertically until they were level with the helicopter. "Can you identify this machine? I can, and so can everybody watching TV." Then she zoomed to the front window of the helicopter. "And can you identify the man in the left hand seat? Do I need to paint a picture for you? If he isn't fired from his position and jailed in the next five minutes, there will be more national media here than there are Envoys. How do you think the people of the United States of America will feel about a President that allows an attack on a friendly nation's Embassy by the Secretary of State?"

"Before you answer that question, remember that I, too, am an American citizen. Bart," she spoke for the President's ability to hear her next command, but the actual command was

sent mentally, “fold the rotors, and land that thing in the street just short of the missiles.”

::Squad, I want a shield around that chopper, and I want those persons defenseless.:
Bart sent.

::You got it, boss,:: was the reply.

::Mata, bring the Secret Service officers out here, please.::

“Mr. President?” Muriel said, “I believe there's something you want to say. Now.”

“Um. It has come to my attention that the Envoy Embassy was fired upon, today, by the Secretary of State. I am accepting his undated letter of resignation effective immediately, and request that he be placed in your custody. He is not to be allowed communication with anyone but his attorney, and is not to be released unless and until a trial finds him not guilty. This 'no communication' order includes his guards. In addition, the crew of this helicopter is also to be put in custody and charged with attempted murder.”

“Very well,” said one of the officers. “But how are we to get back?”

Mata spoke up, “The same way you got here. We'll take you and them. The helicopter will be rendered inoperative and stored at a secure location. The missiles will be safed and likewise stored. Evidence will not walk this time. In addition, recordings of the day's events and the President's words will be stored in a secure location pending possible need at trial, or for the media.” That last caused the President to turn absolutely pale. “I believe, considering that this is a clear treaty violation and attempted murder of an American citizen and an ambassador, that the charge of armed insurrection against the United States will be in order.”

“Out of the aircraft, people. One at a time.” Mata amplified her voice so it could be heard throughout the Enclave, and easily inside the helicopter.

Five minutes later everything was cleared away and the guests, involuntary and unwelcome both, had been transported. Muriel was still furious as she turned to walk back into her office.

“Muriel?”

“Don't, Ted,” she snapped. “Just don't. I will not be molly-coddled.”

“I hadn't intended to. I might have been a bit gentler with the President. But you acted well and controlled, and got the point across. Especially when you mentioned the media. A treaty violation and attempted murder would have ended his career with a trial of the President as an accessory. He knew that. He also knew that he had been covering things up to please people that he really shouldn't have taken campaign money from. You did good.”

Some of the steam left Muriel. “Yea, I was a bit rough on him. But doggone it, this can't keep happening. I don't mind being the target. I've learned to take care of myself. But

my friends are still too new to this. They could have been killed.”

“Um. Who do you think stopped the missiles? Your shields on your office end six inches from the wall. Check it out, yourself.”

Muriel did. Then looked at the kids, all standing across the front of the building, just inside the glass. Clyde was in the center, with Don next to him. The doors were open, and Clyde said, “it would appear that your style of shield is most effective. Especially when produced by a linked group of people, Muriel.” Her mouth dropped open. Then she looked at Ted

“Clyde tried to build a shield in a hurry. Don forced a link with the rest of the kids and pulled him inside, and changed the shield to an anchored bubble, but inside out so the sticky stuff was on the inside,” Ted said. “It happened too fast for me to do anything about it, because I was looking the wrong way at the time. And they held them. Just like you did with the RPG, until Bart could get a crew out to save them and move them. Both had good instincts and tried. Don's succeeded. But Clyde tried. You have to give him credit for that.”

Muriel walked over to the door. “Clyde,” she said. Then reached out and hugged him. The poor guy looked very confused. “Thank you. What you did sparked Don to do what you haven't had practice doing. Don,” she moved to him and hugged him. “Thank you for acting so fast. And so surely. Kids, you did good. You responded in an emergency and went with the action. I wouldn't have blamed any of you for ducking for cover.”

“You wouldn't have. Ducked for cover, I mean,” said one of the kids. “You acted when the RPG was in the air. You stood up to the principal when she shot at you. It's time we stood up, too.”

“And you and Ted were right,” another said. “My parents thought I was talking about a video game. And thought the uniform and backpack were souvenirs that you'd given me for being at the Enclave. I didn't even bother mentioning meeting Lotta. They just wouldn't have understood.”

“Will they actually go to trial?” asked Muriel.

“Do you really want to know?” At Muriel's nod Ted continued, “Likely Mr. Scot will have an aneurysm burst in his brain. The pilot will probably hang himself. The rest of the crew of the helicopter will probably meet with unfortunate accidents of one form or another. End result? No trial, but all will die. At least one will totally die.” Ted just looked tired and sad. “The evidence will eventually be dismantled and the scrap used for making refrigerators or something. And the media will never know about the battle of the Enclave where the Envoys won without firing a shot.” He gave a smile that was more of a grimace.

“It's a win. I don't need accolades. I've got friends. Talented friends. Speaking of which, how are you kids doing? Headaches? Tired?” asked Muriel. A chorus of “I'm fine” answered her. “Then maybe we should get on with your training.”

“Um,” said Ted. “There’s something else that needs to be taken care of, first. And I think it’s your turn to do it.” He sent the instructions to Muriel, and her eyes widened.

“You’re right, Ted. Kids, hands up.” That’s all she had to say for most of them. “Clyde, you, too.” When they all had their hands up Muriel followed Ted’s instructions, and there was suddenly a second stripe on their sleeves, collars, and seams. “You just defended yourselves and the Envoy Enclave Embassy. It could have been any defense where you helped someone other than yourself. The point is that by doing so you earned your second stripe.”

“Geez,” came a comment from down the line. “I didn’t do anything. I was just too scared to move.”

“Sometimes that’s how heroes are made,” Ted smiled. “Too bad there aren’t any stripes given out for rubbing the President’s nose in his mess, like a bad puppy.” He turned the smile on Muriel, and even the kids who’d never tried to paper train a puppy laughed.

“OK, well . . . today you’re going to learn how to do what I did for you yesterday. You’re going to learn to translate from one place to another. Now, how many peeked when I made the move from down here to upstairs?” No shock, but Don was the first to tentatively raise his hand. But Muriel was shocked that shy little Fran was the second. At the end of a minute, she discovered that they all had their hands up. “Well, so much for a girl having secrets,” which raised a laugh. “And how many tried it and had to get bailed out by an Envoy?” This time, Clyde was the only hold-out, which was not surprising since he wasn’t allowed to do anything that the rest of the kids hadn’t been taught. “So, what did you do wrong?”

The answers varied a bit in wording. But the upshot was that they didn’t clearly visualize where they wanted to go. “Didn’t anyone think to send your mind out and look?” Muriel asked. “You won’t always have been to the place where you need to go. But, if you look with your mind you can see it. Also, you HAVE to check to be sure it’s clear and going to be clear for that split-second that it takes to go there.”

“I’ll admit, I really didn’t think about how I did this. I just did it, like I was taught. I’d think about where I wanted to go, and I could see it in my mind. I’m going to have to think about how I do it before I can teach you how to do it,” Muriel said.

“Or,” Mata chimed in, “you could just ask me and your squads to help.”

“Beast,” said Muriel.

“Cheat,” responded Mata, with a grin.

“Slave driver” “Impossible child” The insults got stranger, and the kids laughter louder as they went along.

“Seriously,” Mata said after they caught their breath from laughing, “when you did it, I saw that you sent your mind out, and didn’t think that you shouldn’t have been able to do it

without instruction. It's the reason we wouldn't let you translate Home until we showed you where it was. And you've consistently done so, or I would have overruled the translation. Yes, I watch. That's part of being a security chief."

"But, we can do this," added Mata. "The squads can help. Give me a minute to get with the squads, and figure out places, here, that we can have your friends use for visualization and possible translation. Places where there's no danger to them."

"But won't it be likely that we'll have to translate someplace dangerous?" asked one of the kids.

"Yes. But once you know how to do it that will be up to you. This isn't to keep you from doing what you feel you have to do, then. This is to keep you safe while you learn the procedures. Once learned, you'll do them all the time, and you'll weigh your own risks. And when you have your own security details, they'll help you. This instruction and test is to see if you can do it, not to censure where you go once you're trained."

Mata aimed a thought at the collective security details, and some of the kids eyes bugged out. "Man, you can almost see the thoughts fly, it's that thick. Something like a group mind might be," one of the boys said.

"Oh, you can see that?" asked Ted.

"Not really see it, sir. More like feel it but it's right on the edge of being able to be seen. I think I see how they do it. I'm not sure we could. I think we think too slow."

One of the security detail came over and put his arm around the boy. "No, you just can't do it right now. Part of it is because you have physical bodies that are taking up a part of your thinking without you realizing it. But part of it is just lack of practice. You'll get faster. Ted and Muriel may not realize it but many of their mental talks have taken less time than they would have thought had passed. Ted's been doing it for a long time, and Muriel just kinda fell into thinking faster with him. Like he was pushing her."

"I think Mata may have been helping, too," Ted added. "That trick of Muriel's of just seeming to know how to do something. I think there's some sub-conscious leaking between them. Maybe right from the start. She shouldn't have been able to establish a mental link on her own without instruction. But she did it."

Suddenly, the eyes of every member of the security details, and Mata's and Muriel's, were riveted on Ted.

"Is that possible?" asked Muriel. "And is there a way to create that leak?"

Another flurry of no-activity flashed between the detail members and Mata. "Yes," said Mata, "but we're going to need more recruits. At least one per child. They'll eventually be Security Chiefs."

Bart interrupted, "Recruits exist. Ted, you may not realize it but there were more Envoys who wanted to be on security detail than were needed for you. So when Muriel came along, we had no trouble filling out her squads. Since all the activity that she's been through, even more have offered to join security details. We have enough to fill out squads for ALL of them. Even Clyde."

"Clyde," Bart added, "I added you to the list because of the way you've behaved in trying to be a kid, and struggling to learn both how to be human and how to do these things we do. I hope you don't take offense, but well . . ."

Clyde gave a wain smile. "I was wrong. Really wrong. And I didn't realize it and couldn't acknowledge it. Working with Don – even getting ripped apart by him – showed me how wrong I was. I'll accept any help I can get. And I'll supply any help that I can. But there's a lot of this stuff that I never took the time to learn. Most of these kids are faster than I am at picking it up. That's a very humbling feeling."

"OK, Bart," Ted said, "How about just security chiefs for them, for right now. For one thing, it'll be easier to store only one Envoy in a closet when the parents snoop." This brought an explosion of laughter. "Gender specific, please. And like Mata, maybe appear to be the age of the child."

"You got it. Sit down, kids. This will take a little bit." Bart had that unfocused look of somebody holding a mental conversation.

Mata just stared at Bart with her mouth open. "OK, now I see why Ted's in charge. He's got Bart running him." A snort from Muriel brought on another wave of laughter, especially when the kids saw the sour look on Ted's face.

In ones and twos, more Envoys arrived. Some looked around at the kids and left again. Others seemed to search for something, then smile when they found it, and move toward one of the children. It took about 10 minutes for this apparent sorting to take place, but finally an Envoy was standing by every child, including Clyde who look dumbstruck.

"Yes, I was your greatest antagonist and detractor. Now I'm your biggest supporter. I'll help, Clyde. Honest and honestly. We'll find a way together. You, me, Don and his Security Chief. We'll make an unbeatable team."

"OK," Bart said. "Now gender and age specific, if you please. Mata's crew, for the most part, stays that way. So if any of you have a problem with that let us know. We'll either help you or find a replacement. No problems? Good, then choose your characters."

Some envoys immediately changed. Some took longer, seeming searching for something in the child they stood by. Those changes were slower, and often tweaked a bit after the initial change. Most of them wore uniforms, though some opted for casual dress like a kid would wear. It was fascinating to watch, and over too soon. Then Bart explained the problem. Again, since he'd explained it to the prospective new Security Chiefs before. Another lightning interchange took place, then the new Envoys looked at their respective

child. The child looked back, and they both grinned. The initial mental links were expanded to allow a two way leakage. Mata tapped Muriel on the shoulder and she felt a gentle nudge. Both of them relaxed their minds a bit, and suddenly it was like having a friend inside your skin just a bit. Mental communication became faster, and more colorful, filled with the flavors of possible new ideas and colors of attitudes good and bad.

::Bart, how did we stumble on it?: Ted asked.

::Simple. You read the right books. But I am NOT a horse:: They both chuckled at the reference to a particular science fantasy series.

::So, why didn't we set this up to begin with?:

::Ted, you were very concerned about propriety. And you thought you were going to be the primary link. So you clamped down. There were parts of your life that you didn't think Muriel should be exposed to. And she seemed to do very well under those circumstances. The reason, of course, was the partial leak she was getting from Mata::

::So, you were the reason I was able to do all the things I needed to do right from the start::

::Well, yes, Ted. But you needed to. And learning was a two way street. You did things in your own way, and some things that I never would have thought to do. But you also needed to learn fast, so I made it possible for you to learn by doing. I think that's what Mata did with Muriel::

While this interchange was going on, Mata sent her ideas for the translations to Muriel and got approval. ::But YOU act as traffic cop. I don't want any collisions,:: Muriel sent. Mata agreed, and pairs – child and Envoy – started popping in and out. In fact, the action actually reminded Muriel of popcorn.

Muriel spent the time that pairs weren't popping about introducing herself to the new Envoys. Yet the introductions seemed strange, not like it had with her own security detail. Then she realized why. She was catching a frisson of excitement from the Envoys. Then she thought again, and felt very alone. The new Envoys were in awe of her, as they were of Ted. It wasn't a fear. It was the sort of thing one feels when being introduced to someone important that one looks up to.

Mata put her arm around Muriel and sent, ::It won't always be so for them. It's all just very new. And you have a reputation of seeing things differently from Ted. You and I know that that's the way it's supposed to be. But it isn't that way for Envoys, for the most part. I think we've let this go on long enough. All the kids have translated alone at least three times, now. And you wouldn't believe how much we've picked up from the kids on how to be human, and what makes you different. And I'm pretty sure Ted will agree with you. They've made individual contributions to the body of knowledge of humans AND Envoys, and how many different ways the same thing can be done. Time for another stripe, I think::

Muriel went to the front of the squad break-room area and said, "Kids. Would you sit down in the recliners, please. Envoys, stand by your charge? OK. Mata just told me that you're all successful at translating, now. She also said that each of you do things slightly differently, but you all get results. So raise your hands."

Third stripes appeared as soon as their hands were up, and the kids cheered.

"After lunch, we need to see about your fourth stripe. Now, you've already done it with me. But this time you have to do it alone. Your Envoys will help teach you how to visualize where you're going, just like they did when you were popping in and out like popcorn. But it is different. You're going to a different dimension, so you need to know how to see it. Your Envoys will go with you to be sure you're safe. But they won't be helping you or doing it for you."

"Remember when I said that you were the first people to go to Home and come back without dying first. Well except for me, that is. Now you'll be the first people besides me who do it on your own. But that's after lunch and a break to get you calmed down. OK?"

And the group erupted in cheers that went on for minutes. Muriel thought that they could probably be heard all over Enclave.

Chapter 11

The Fourth Stripe

(Wednesday afternoon)

The kids calmed down enough to translate upstairs, proud as punch that they could do it themselves, and assembled around the table. With the additional Envoys it made for a full table. Muriel's squad mates had fixed sandwiches, fresh fruit, milk and cookies, and served as the kids sat down. Mata could feel the rest of her security detail downstairs, talking among themselves and sharing in the enthusiasm that the kids were throwing off like sparks.

As Muriel sat down, Mata came over to her. "Your parents are here," she said. "They're on the way up." Muriel immediately got up and went to the elevator.

Her dad was the first off the elevator, and Muriel knew she was in trouble from the look on his face. "What is going on here! Now they're shooting missiles at you? Where will this end?"

"Hi dad. Hi mom. Let me explain"

"NO! Enough is enough. You're coming home and giving up this business. It's too dangerous," her father broke in.

"No, dad. Now you WILL listen. If I left, I'd still have the skills I've learned. But I'd no longer have the security. Nor would you. And they'd still be after me, whoever it is that wants me stopped. No, the only way out is through. That's one of your favorite sayings for when I get in trouble, isn't it? I have to deal with whatever it is, whether it requires an apology or doing some work, or whatever. I," and she stressed the word 'I', "I have to find my own way out of it. You might offer suggestions, but I have to find my way through. It's been that way all my life. And this is just another one."

"Now, as to the missiles – yes, they were meant to take me out. But they were stopped. You remember my friends? Look around the table. Half the kids there are my friends from school. They were the ones that stopped the missiles. I was the one that went and got the President, and showed him who was behind all the attacks. It was the Secretary of State, and he's been arrested, along with the crew of the helicopter."

"But . . . but the Secretary of State was the one that approved your documents!"

"Yes, but he had to. It was approve them or leave and somebody else would. He had no choice. And, for whatever reason, he needed to stay Secretary of State. I think he's actually working for someone else. And I hope we can find out who soon. As for the Secretary, he'll never go to trial. He went too far with this last act. If his 'owners' don't take him out, then Ted probably will. Or me. No vengeance. He'll just have an aneurysm or something. It's anybody's guess who will be the one to help him on his way."

"Finding out who is behind all this is important. If I left, then one possible way of finding out would be out of everybody's hands. No, I must stay. To protect myself. To protect you and these friends of mine. To protect the Envoys and Enclave. And I know you see that. I also know that you don't like it. You don't have to like it to realize that, once again, the only way out is through."

Muriel sighed. "I don't think there will be any more overt acts of violence. Whoever is controlling the Secretary of State will realize that that was a major bust, and too public. Obviously, or you wouldn't have stormed in here demanding the impossible." She grinned at him to take the sting out of it. "I think the next move will either be attempting to get the media against us, and thereby the general population, or something legal. Maybe even both at the same time. It's the way that some criminals and politicians are dealt with."

"Is there any difference between criminals and politicians?" her father asked.

"Well, we can hope," Muriel replied with a chuckle.

"Muriel, who's that boy with stripes on his arm that I don't recognize? That one, there, next to Donny," her mother asked.

"Ma'am. Mrs. White, my name is Clyde. I guess you'd say I'm new."

"Oh. And you're a friend of Muriel's?"

"Well, I hope so." He looked at Muriel and she sent ::You can say as much or as little as you like. I'll back you.::

"Ma'am, when Muriel visited Home I kinda made a jerk of myself. I'm actually an Envoy. But I didn't like change, and thought that Ted was all wrong, and what were all these kids doing there. Ted pulled me aside and told me I had a choice: apologize and learn, or leave. It never hit me how serious he was about the whole thing until then. So I went back to apologize to Muriel for my behavior and, well, Don tore into me and made me realize just how serious my mistake was. So I asked him to help me, and Muriel let me come here and learn."

"Clyde, that took a lot of guts. And it looks like you've made some advances. And if you're sitting at Muriel's table, she must have accepted you. I've never known her to be wrong about who she chooses to be her friend, and only friends would be invited to lunch with her. I think you can count it that she thinks of you as a friend."

"So we can't convince you to come back to us?" her dad asked.

"Dad, I'll happily live with you. But I can't stop being what and who I am. Any more than you can. I love you both. This? This is something that I never expected. But it's already had its benefits, despite the apparent down sides. I've never been in any real danger. I was taught too well how to protect myself. And I've found that I'm pretty good at teaching others, at least with help from Envoys, I am. I've got to continue. And I want you safe. If I

quit then you wouldn't be.” ::Oh, yes they would:: sent Fran. ::But I'll keep my mouth shut. I understand what you're doing. And they'll come around. Sorry for not warning you. I didn't know they'd show up and interrupt you::

“How are you two doing, now? Are you getting used to feeling younger?”

“Um . . . well”

“Actually, dear,” her mother said, “If you wouldn't mind staying here a couple more nights, I think Fred and I still have some catching up to do.”

Whereupon her father turned bright red. “Really, Lily. I don't think she needs to know all the details.” Muriel tried very hard not to laugh, and managed to turn a smile into a grimace.

“Now Fred, if she's old enough to dodge bullets and juggle missiles, then she's old enough to take a gentle hint. She IS growing up, after all.”

“It's OK,” Muriel said. “I don't mind staying here. I'm protected. I have company when I want it. And, in a way, it makes me feel more grown up.”

::Oh, Muriel:: sent Mata. ::That one was hitting below the belt::

::Quiet, you. I'm trying to juggle eggs::

::Yes sir, boss. Whatever you say, boss::

Muriel just sent an image of her sticking out her tongue.

“Well, Fred. We've taken up enough of our young lady's time. It looks like she's busy. And we need to see those shops that Fran suggested. You need some new suits, and I think I could find one or two things, myself.” Lily grabbed her husband's arm and tried to pull him away

“Muriel,” her dad said, “WHY did you have to tell her that it was free?” It was almost a pleading voice. Muriel just laughed.

“Go along, you two old whippersnappers. I've got work to do this afternoon, and I haven't had lunch yet. I've got a group of kids to put through their final exams.”

::Oh, WELL done, Muriel,:: sent Mata.

When Muriel's parents had taken the elevator back down, she returned to her place and sent, ::Mata, why do I feel like I just lied through my teeth. The things I told my parents weren't lies, but it felt like it::

::Muriel, you did what you needed to do to help them understand that they'd shaped

your personality, and you were just following their guidance. No, you didn't lie. Yes, you did use the truth in ways that overemphasized portions of it. But you weren't wrong in essence. Things would fall apart without you doing your job, whether from here or your parent's original home. You're doing things that no one else could do. And doing it well. And I think you're enjoying it, too. Let's get these kids through their fourth stripe. And I think their fifth will follow shortly after. That will make them equal, in what they can do, to you and Ted. They may even be named as ambassadors sometime. I don't know what Ted's intentions are. But you've already shown him that you can do more than he ever expected. I know, because he set aside a year to get you trained and them started. It's been what? Four days? Five? I don't know. Things have gone fast. And you've weathered it and you've helped the kids weather it. WELL DONE, girl!::

Muriel looked up from her plate. All around the table, her friends had frozen and just looked at her. Some even had sandwiches half-way to their mouths.

"Muriel," Fran said, "you're not going to quit, are you? Just when we're about to finish up? We need you. You've made this stuff easy for us. And thinking about it, and the way school teachers would have taught it, we wouldn't have made it any other way. But you made it easy and like a game or a holiday."

"I'm not going anywhere. And you will finish. And it may lead to something neither one of us can predict," Muriel replied, softly. "But I've got to admit, that was rough."

"We're here for you. Whatever you need," said Fran.

"You already have been. You . . . all of you stopped the missiles. Speaking of which, Mata," she spoke and sent, "I want those shields pushed out to 1 foot from the wall. It's my characteristic. Everything stops 1 foot away. We were lucky that my friends did the same thing."

"Don, thank you for thinking so fast and puling the rest in for help."

"He said to," Don said, pointing to Clyde. "Afterward, he said that it would have been too much for me, even anchored. They were under power. As it was, it rocked all of us a bit. But we held. When the power cut off, it was easy. But we stayed together."

"Clyde," Muriel said, "now you know why I gave you your second, along with everyone else. I'd say you proved yourself. I won't pull you out of the gang. You'll earn your stripes along with them. But after that, I'll push to have your restrictions lifted."

"You won't have to," said Ted, from behind her. "And I agree. I'd pull the restrictions now, but he asked to go the whole way with your friends. And that just confirmed to me that he deserved to have them lifted when they've all passed."

"I actually came over for two reasons. There's a double squad of Envoy that are awaiting your signal. The target for your troops is the same place you took them. That'll make it a bit easier. The double squad will make sure that it's clear and stays clear. I found

your friend Lotta. She was thrilled that I'd ask her to stand in that square and wait for your mutual friends. So they've got a double target."

"On the other hand, our nemesis, Mr. Scot, is no longer our problem. We were able to get some information from him, but not enough. Still, we're tracking everything we can. Oh, and the deed wasn't one of ours. We think his boss pulled his plug. The information I got was after the fact. And yes, I finished it. The problem with that is that now we've got an unknown to deal with. I've talked to your parents. Yes, they've calmed down from this morning's shock. I almost had to make an appointment through Fran to see them." This had Muriel chuckling. "And they've agreed to stay in Enclave as long as we feel that they should, and they said that, perhaps, you should stay at your apartment. Apparently, something you said made them realize that you're 12 going on 40. They're not upset with you. In fact, just the opposite. They're very proud. And so am I. So finish your lunch, and finish your job. And if you don't mind, I'd like to be here when they make the trip, so I can congratulate them when they return."

"Of course you can be here. Can we get you come lunch?" Muriel asked.

"No, I ate. I'll just join your squads, downstairs and wait for you." He took a step back and disappeared.

"Gee, Muriel. Ted wants to watch. Does that mean that he's testing you?" one of her friends asked.

"Nope. It means he's proud of you crazy jerks and wants to cheer you on and welcome you back. Basically, he's telling me that he approves of what I'm doing and how I'm doing it. Know how I know that? Because he DIDN'T say, 'can I stay and help.' Oh, and he doesn't know about the mental leakage thing, yet. Wait until he finds out that you guys can be as inventive as I can."

"No, this was an experiment that blew up in his face. He figured it would be a long time before he had more than one in training. Remember when you first met him and he said, '12 at one time?' He'd only spotted 4 potential trainees. I proved him wrong by bringing all 12 of you to the point where you could start training, and by using the same trick that I had used – making the mental link yourselves. From that point on, he's let me do what I thought was the right way to teach you. Even if I asked him questions. Nope. I'm not being tested. And really, neither are you. All the way along I've tried to make it so that when you actually did something you already knew how to do it. Well, sometimes I've had to find other ways to show you. But overall, you're making progress as fast as I did. And he's impressed with you." Muriel went back to her lunch, gulping down her sandwich and milk. She wanted this over with. And the kids were done, and would only get antsy if they had to wait too long.

So, it was only a few moments later when Muriel asked Mata to clear the squad room chairs, and she and the mob around her table translated downstairs. And there she boggled a bit. Her office was packed, wall to wall with Envoys. Her squads, of course, were there, and so were the individual 'Security Details' of her friends. And Ted. But there were so many more that it was mind boggling. Bart was there, she expected that if Ted was. But so was

Mark. And so many others that she didn't know. Right, Muriel, she thought. No pressure. Then she spotted her parents, seated on chairs liberated from the squad desks, sitting right in the front row middle, next to Ted, and the quiet confidence they showed in her made her nervous all over again.

Balance, Muriel thought to herself, as she walked up to the front of the squad room so the kids could see her. By the time she reached her spot, she had an idea of how to proceed.

"OK, you lot," she said, looking at the mob of an audience, "here's how it's going to be. You're going to be quiet and let the kids get on with it. No whispered comments, not even any private worries. Nothing. If you can't do that then leave now. If you do create any disturbance you'll find yourself out in the street. Bart, I want you to be Sergeant at Arms. I need Mata to help me. So you're it. Any disturbance and they're out and can't come back. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am. You're covered," He replied.

"OK. Kids," she turned back to her charges, "this is going to be easy. You've already done this over and over, so you're familiar with the procedure. Only the destination has changed. Envoys," she asked of the kids' security people, "do you have the visualization?"

One of them responded, "A square in front of where the hill used to be, defined by twelve Envoys facing out from all sides. Good sized space. And a young lady I've been told was a friend of yours, named Lotta, standing at the back of it. No sweat."

"That's the one. The Envoys are there to keep the area clear. And Lotta is there because she wants to be, to congratulate her friends. So your job is to help your charges get the clearest visualization they can of where to be, and show them that little twist that accounts for the different dimension. You can go with them. In fact, I'd hope you would . . ."

"You couldn't keep us from it," said one of the others.

"But you are not to help them once they decide to make the translation. Go with them, monitor, encourage when they get there. But not help. You shouldn't need to. So, go to it. Only one is to go and come back at a time, so it's going to take a little time. The reason for only one at a time is to keep the room from looking like the inside of a popcorn popper." Which got a laugh from the kids, and helped them relax.

Then there was quiet. Kids had linked to their Envoys and Muriel could almost feel the pulse of the mental traffic. Including the undercurrent, the leakage, that colored it and made the information more complete. The trick that had made it possible for her to out-do anything that had been expected of her. Then Clyde and his Envoy moved to the kitchen area and disappeared. A couple of minutes later he was back, with a grin on his face. He never said a word, just went back to his seat. His Envoy put a hand on his shoulder, as if expressing his congratulations.

And that started the mad dash. One after another the kids would leave, be gone a

couple of minutes, and come back grinning to quietly sit down and wait. The last, Fran, was finally on her way, and Muriel began to relax. Fran had done well in all the rest.

Then her Envoy came back alone and said, "She's GONE!"

Chapter 12

Disaster

(Wednesday Afternoon)

"Ted," Clyde shouted as he jumped up. "Please."

"Lifted," Ted replied, and Clyde jumped vertically and disappeared.

By this time, Muriel had Fran's Envoy by the arm and said, "What happened!"

"She got there, no problem. She landed in the center of the square, just as she'd seen. Lotta was at the back of the square, so she moved toward her. Then suddenly she was gone. She wasn't trying to translate, I'd have known if she had been, I've been that close to her. She was just . . . gone."

"Mark?" Muriel asked.

"On it." Mark jumped to the Envoy's side and began working to calm her down.

"I think we've found who's against us," Ted said. "That's why I lifted the restrictions on Clyde. What he sent may be the answer, and he's our best hope of finding her, right now. I don't think they'll hurt her. They want a hostage."

Muriel turned to Mata, who simply held up her hand to silence her. The most intense look was on Mata's face, and on that of all her security people. Suddenly, Mata physically and mentally shouted "NOW!", and they all jumped.

"They'll come back outside," realized Muriel. "NO! Stay here. They'll need room to come in. Bart . . ."

"Already ahead of you. The area for a hundred feet each way of the door is now blocked off from traffic. They'll have as much room as they like to come in." Muriel and Ted plowed through the crowd to the doors, but didn't go out.

And suddenly they were back, surrounded by Muriel's security detail, like a Roman Phalanx. Clyde and Fran were in the center. And suddenly so was Mark, on her other side.

"Muriel," Clyde said, "For your information, she made the translation back, alone. I didn't bring her. Check with Mata."

"That's right. We monitored. When we got there Fran was already back, and Lotta was trying to calm her down. Clyde was behind her, trying to make her feel surrounded and protected, and muttering to himself. I won't repeat what he was saying. Finally Fran straightened up and said, 'I've got to get back.' We all linked for intent, not to take her. She

did it herself. There and back, alone.”

“OK, then she's eligible. Clyde, are you OK?” asked Muriel.

“Yes, and so is Lotta. She was concerned, but when Fran came back she settled right down and did her best to calm her. Did a pretty good job of it, too.”

“Ted,” Clyde went on, “I know who it was. We have both ends of the beast, head and tail, but not the body.”

“OK, we'll talk later.” Ted said, grimly. “Get Fran into the break-room and lets give people their stripes. YOU do it, Muriel. You deserve that.”

Mark and Clyde helped a now somewhat calmed and strengthened Fran to her seat, and Muriel and Ted went to the front and faced the kids. Fran's Envoy was hugging her charge like she didn't ever want to let go. But finally things settled out and Fran was seated with her Envoy standing beside her. Remarkably, none of the other kids or Envoys had moved from their seats. Clyde's Envoy was looking at him with a strange look on his face.

“First,” Muriel said, “I want to congratulate you kids. You stayed put and let those actively involved do what was needed. Thank you.”

“We didn't have any choice,” said one of the kids. “Our Envoys held us here until we understood that we'd only be in the way, and made sure we could see and hear in our minds what was going on.”

“Then a well done to your Envoys, too. Second, we've had a little excitement,” which brought some snorts and snickers, “but everybody passed. Now you know how to get Home and back again. Sounds like a Tolkien story, doesn't it. You did good. Clyde tells me that Fran got back to Home on her own, and completed the trip back here on her own. I have no reason to doubt him. So, with that taken care of, there's one little matter to finish up. On your feet, kids. Hands in the air. Let's show the people how it's done.”

The kids jumped up and raised their hands high, and Muriel applied the fourth stripe. And Ted applied the fifth in color. Then the bedlam started. Muriel and Ted let it run for about 5 minutes, they couldn't have quieted the kids or the audience short of that.

Then Ted addressed the kids. “You may have noticed that you now have five stripes instead of four.” This was met with laughter. “Those are temporary stripes, based on what Muriel and I had chosen. Red for girls, blue for boys. The color can be changed, if you wish. But we wanted you to know that you'd earned them and had the right to them, now. They're braided, like Muriel's and mine, but not braided with two colors. Later in life, if you partner with someone that's passed all the tests, you can ask that they be braided together. And no, that doesn't mean anything about the reason that Muriel's and mine are braided together. Ours are because we are co-leaders here.” This caused Muriel some shock. She hadn't thought it all the way through about why they were braided together.

"One other thing. You all know where your 'no-pockets' are. Reach in and pull out a booklet." They did. They'd seen one like it before. "Yes, they are what they appear to be, though they haven't been approved by the U.S. Government, yet. Those are Home and Envoy passports. You can consider yourselves to be citizens of both America and Home. This is saying that Home has adopted you. We'll see about ambassador status, later."

"You kids have done better than well. You've astounded me. Muriel, on the other hand, seems to have taken this rather matter-of-factly. I never expected that she'd train more than one at a time. But she brought all 12 – OK 13 of you through together. Not only that, but in such a way that you could deal with emergencies and work together. And that's flat amazing. She, and you, have managed to show us new things about ourselves and create changes that are still rocking the Envoys. They are NOT unhappy with you. Shocked? Yes. Amazed? Yes. But very pleased. You've shown that humans, or at least human children – I know, I know, that word rankles a bit, but look at it from their side – human children can be trained in Envoy techniques and respond as responsible adults despite your young years and lack of experience."

"Clyde, I let you off the limitations early. But only because it was a technicality. You'd already proved yourself, you just didn't have the stripe to show that to other people. So, really, it wasn't early. And you did good. Thank you. And now I think it's time for me to stop talking so much and let Muriel get on with whatever."

"Just a moment, Ted," one of the Envoys in the audience said. "I understand that the kids have been in Enclave twice, now, and haven't had a chance to see much of it. Some of us would like to show them around. We'll be careful. I promise, we won't get hurt." This raised a chuckle from the kids. "That is, if Muriel doesn't mind."

She looked at the kids with speculation. The kids looked at her while holding their breath. "Oh OK. I THINK they'll behave themselves." The reaction was mixed laughter and cheers. And the kids made a mass exodus for the street. Clyde and Fran stayed behind. Clyde said it was because he could always see it later. Fran because she was still a bit shocky. Muriel's parents came over to her, and it caused her some trepidation. But the first words out of her dad's mouth dispelled that.

"Daughter, I apologize," her father said. "I was out of line. I didn't realize just what you were doing. I saw it, today. You make decisions like a sergeant in a combat zone. But you also do things with humor and respect. You're not afraid of being overruled, and you handle emergencies like they were commonplace. I'm proud of you. I'm proud to be your father. But it's tough not seeing you as a little girl any more." She was speechless, and just hugged him.

"I made him come, today," her mother said. "It's ridiculous to judge somebody you don't know. And you've changed. You're no longer the insecure person you were. I think it scared him, some. I'm . . . we're sorry about the school. We were told that it was the only one that could take you. We should have checked that out."

"It's OK, mom. It really is. It's worked itself out," Muriel said, as she disentangled from her father. "And you, too, dad. It isn't easy being me. But it does have its benefits. Like

watching 13 people accomplish things that most humans wouldn't even begin to understand. And to find out that I enjoy teaching. It's fun."

Meanwhile, Ted and Clyde were head-to-head, talking. Well, mostly Clyde was talking and Ted was listening. It was obvious that Ted was trying to get as much information as he could about what happened to Fran. Only asking questions once in a while to clarify things. Finally, Ted said, "We have ways of getting that information. And we will. And thanks for bird-dogging it. I won't ask you to take an active part. It's hard to act against your friends."

"But I will. In a sense, I already have taken an active part. I was wrong, Ted. And too stupid to realize it. It took being slapped down by a human child to show me just how wrong I was. I want to learn more about them, and I hope they'll let me. But THIS . . . this mess needs to be cleaned up. And I know I can help with it. And I won't fault you for whatever action you decide is necessary. I think I'm finally growing up. Now, I think I'll look around a bit and see what you've done down here. I also think I'll stay a kid and in uniform," he said, looking down at his sleeves. "Somehow, this seems more important than being an Envoy." Clyde and his Envoy security left.

Ted looked around and saw that Muriel's parents had left, and she was collapsed in a recliner. "There is a reason why I chose that particular square for people to make their first translation to. Kinda symbolic. There used to be a hill there, with a throne on top. I crushed the throne and leveled the hill when I took over. A symbol that there wasn't anyone above us. But long before I did that, people used to be taken there to be judged. And, in a sense, that's what you and the kids did, but it was a self-judgment. You showed that you could get their, bodily, without dying first. It was a declaration that there were no limits for you. I'm proud of the way you handled it yourself, and the way you got the kids to handle it. And very impressed. Twelve at once. Unreal."

"Very real. It isn't really more difficult to train twelve than one. It just takes a little more organization, and Mata's good at that, and being able to know when someone is having trouble. And giving the kids their own security Envoy, and getting them to have that mental leak took care of that. The rest was just tell them how to do something, in general terms, and turn them loose to deal with it with their Envoys. The result was that each of them had training tailored to them. And maybe different from the person next to them, but still achieved the same results."

"Muriel?" Fran tentatively interrupted. "Can I talk to you?"

"Of course, Fran."

"Um" she started, and looked out of the corner of her eye at Ted.

"Muriel, I've got some things to go over. I'll be back a little later."

"OK, Ted. Thanks for being here." She knew why Ted was leaving. Fran wanted to talk privately.

When Muriel turned back to her, Fran said, "I don't think I should have the stripe."

"Why not? You completed the training. Both Clyde and my security chief, and your Envoy, say that you got back on your own. That's the criteria. No sweat. You qualify."

"Yes, but I got grabbed. I mean, they didn't really grab me. They couldn't reach me through the shield. And when I realized what they were doing I panicked."

"OK, I can see that happening. In fact, it could happen to anyone. You were taken by surprise. So what happened then, Fran? Did they let you go?"

"Oh, no. When I realized they'd grabbed my shields to grab me, I also realized they were the old style shields – 6 flat panels. And I had room to move inside them. So I just thought of that square where Lotta was, and stepped back."

Muriel hugged Fran. "Oh, girl! You out thought them. And walked away from them leaving them looking foolish. Good for you. You didn't get yourself into the mess, but you got yourself out!"

"You mean, I did right?" Fran asked.

"Honey, you went to Home twice. Once from here, where you knew, and once from an unknown location. And you did it by translating through their shields. Do you realize what this means? Of course you don't. It means that the old style shields can't contain us. And they won't use the new ones because they aren't traditional. I heard some of what Clyde told Ted. They were people he knew. People that had the same sort of attitude he did, until he tangled with us – AND with Don. Does Ted know this? He should. It locks in who's been causing trouble, and gives us a way to get them. Call Ted. Tell him. You've got important information. Just the fact that you could translate through their shields is important. Don't be afraid of him. Just do it."

"Well . . . alright. How do I do it?"

"Just think of him, and call his name."

"Um . . . " she hesitated while she tried to picture his face, then said, "Ted?"

"Yes, Fran." Ted appeared next to Muriel.

"Um . . . Muriel told me that I should tell you. When whoever it was grabbed me they didn't grab me, they grabbed around my shields. Theirs were the old style flat panels. I was scared, but when I saw that I just thought of where I was supposed to be, facing Lotta, and stepped back. Then I was there."

"You translated out of their shields." He said it as a statement. Then grinned. "We've got them! I know who they are, then. Maybe not all of them, but I'll find out. Then they'll be faced with the decision of their lives. Literally. Learn or die. Fran, girl, you just opened up

the whole can of worms and let them wiggle out. Right into this big fishy's mouth." And he started laughing.

"You mean I did right?" Fran asked.

"You did wonderfully. Startled, panicked, scared, you still did the right thing, and gave me the link I needed to find them. Yes, you did right. Very right! Thank you. Gotta go. I need to put together a hunting group to pull them in." And he disappeared.

"Oh" Muriel managed to catch her and get her on a recliner, just as Mark showed up.

"Muriel, what is it about you? Whenever a human tries to faint, you seem to be the center of it," he kidded, as he knelt by Fran and boosted her levels to bring her out of it.

"I guess I'm just talented like that," quipped Muriel. "Seriously, Mark, should I learn some first-aid Envoy style, or something?"

"You can. You don't have to. You've been a bit busy, lately, so I haven't suggested it. And Mata knows a lot and could probably do it. Where is she, by the way?"

"You know? I don't really know." ::Mata?::

::Yes, Muriel.::

::Where are you?::

::Hunting. Ted talks about it, but we do it. I've been listening in. Sorry if that sounds like I'm invading your privacy. I've been doing it with Ted, too. And Fran's information tallied with what Clyde thought, and we've located most of the culprits. We're also trying to figure out where to take them.::

::Oh! Hmm. Do we have an auditorium with a stage and center aisle?::

::Yes, the theater. It doesn't open up for a couple of hours, though,:: Mata replied.

::Ted, Mata and some of the security details have located most of them.::

"WHAT?" Ted was suddenly beside Muriel again. "Sorry, Fran, I didn't mean to startle you. Now, young lady," he turned to Muriel, "explain yourself."

"While you've been trying to find out how to get them, Mata's been tapping information from both of us, and has located most of them. We need a place to put them while we interrogate them. I was thinking of putting them on the stage of the theater under our shields so they can't leave. Then hit them with spotlights like the old-time third degree, then going god-mode and giving them the choice of tell us everything and learn, or die."

“Oh, you wicked, wicked girl. You've been learning too much from Mata.”

::I heard that, Ted:: Mata replied at the same time Muriel said, “Actually, it was you that taught me that trick. Naughty, naughty man. Leading an underage female astray and causing her to have wicked thoughts,” She said with a grin.

“Hold on.” Ted went thoughtful for a moment, then came back into focus and said, “We've got the theater for a couple of hours. That should be enough time. ::Mata, have you located the rest of them, yet?::

::Just. And we just put them under our shields, tight enough that they can't walk out of them. OK, incoming::

“Let's go, boss. It's show-time.” Muriel blinked out, followed by Ted.

They were standing in the center of the stage, under a spotlight. And they were unable to move. Muriel started from the back of the theater, in her normal size, and grew as she got closer to the stage until her head almost touched the ceiling 15 feet above. Ted waited at the back, hidden in the shadows, to see what she would do.

“You!” Her voice boomed and echoed. The colored stripes on her sleeves, collar and pant seams glowed, and her eyes blazed a bright blue. “You tried to take one of my friends. You failed. And now you will tell us everything. You will tell us who is working for you on earth, you will tell us who is working with you in Home. And you will do it now.”

One of the group, near the center, said, “Never!” Muriel casually looked at him, and he crumpled like a piece of wastepaper and dissolved into nothing. Soul death.

Then Muriel said, “You only have one choice. Learn or die. If you can't or won't learn, then you don't deserve the benefits of Home. You don't deserve to live.” There was no anger in her voice. Just resignation. “Your friend is dead. Dead beyond recovery. Soul death. And since all you are is soul, there is nothing left when you die, and no place you go. Learn or die. Humans and Envoys can co-exist. Humans and Envoys can learn from each other. Envoys are nothing but Humans that have never had a physical existence. Learn or die. Learn your place in the universe. Learn how to change. Learn how to learn. Or die. That is your choice. I want information. If you refuse, then you've refused to learn and are unworthy of your place in home. So you will be eliminated. Killed. Thrown away, like the trash you are. I will give you a minute to decide.”

Ted pulled the same stunt, growing larger as he walked forward until his head was just below the ceiling. He said nothing, but the colored stripe glowed and his eyes blazed red. His mere presence showed support of Muriel, and that he would brook no nonsense from these Envoys. He had been declared the leader of Home and the Envoys, and these people had violated what he had set out to do. He had the support of the majority of the Envoys. They didn't. So now they would choose which way they would go.

Chapter 13

Disaster Averted (Wednesday afternoon)

“Your time of reflection is up,” said Muriel. “You,” she pointed at the first one in line, “choose.”

“You have no authority over us. You are only” His words cut off with his dissolution.

“I have the authority. I have it because I am it. You,” she said to the next, “choose.”

“I can only acknowledge the judgment of the true judge. I will not” And another chose to die.

“I am the judge, because I dare to judge myself against a world that you do not acknowledge. Because I dare to do what is necessary to protect myself, my friends and family, and those I have chosen to accept. You have not done the things I have done. You have not seen the things I have seen. You have not endured the things I have endured. You have not learned the things I have learned. And by your unwillingness to learn you judge yourselves as being inferior, warped, corrupt, and unworthy of your place in Home.”

Suddenly Ted's voice rang out. “You! I know you. You swore that you wanted me to lead Home and the Envoys. Yet you won't go where your brothers and sisters go. You will not do what your brothers and sisters do. You have not accepted the changes necessary to save both worlds. You. Choose,” he said, pointing to the next in line.

“I . . . I cannot choose,” he said.

“To not choose is to choose death. Muriel and I offer you life. Choose.”

By now the Envoy was doing what Muriel didn't think Envoys were capable of. He was showing emotion. He was crying. Muriel almost softened. But then she remembered the principal with the gun. The bullies, the RPG aimed at a bus full of kids. The missiles that those same kids had stopped.

And the Envoy broke. It was a long list that included politicians and business leaders. It included teachers and principals and ministers of various religions. It included conservatives and rednecks and silly housewives. It was a long list, but Muriel knew that it was all being recorded.

The other Envoys of the conspiracy looked at the first with horror and revulsion. Finally, the list was concluded. On being asked, the other Envoys choose to die rather than accept the changes in Home, in their status, and in their positions. Ted, sadly, accepted their

decisions and dissolved their souls.

Clyde came in with his Envoy. “Ted, If you like, I'll take him and teach him. It will be an honest teaching. I know where I can take him so he won't have the opportunity to backslide and recant.”

Ted looked at Muriel. “No,” she said. “No, he'll be in my office. With my security detail to watch him. With my friends coming in and out and interacting with him. He needs to see humans. He needs to see what we have to put up with. Clyde, you can help. Of course you can. But it shouldn't be in secret. It shouldn't be hidden away where people can't tell if he's being honest. It wasn't with you. And you proved honest, because you chose to learn from those you had reviled. He needs that same opportunity. And he needs to see what that long list of people are willing to do to destroy us.”

“Let's get him back to the office. I'm supposed to have a squad on duty all the time. They can make sure he stays there, gently, and help teach him. No vengeance. No put-downs. No bullying. Just helpful, considerate behavior and training.”

::I heard that, Muriel. Do you really mean it?: Mata asked.

::Yes. If he can be retrained, he lives. If he can't, he dies. And we will give him every opportunity to live::

::OK, OK. But that's being particularly understanding and non-judgmental about someone that threatened you and your friends::

::Yes. Isn't it. But that's what we're supposed to do, Mata. We're about training. We're about making people's lives better. Look at Clyde. Browbeating children. Then trained by and with the same children. Helping to avert a disaster. Risking himself going after Fran. Well, OK, so she had already saved herself. But he didn't know that. As far as he knew, he was walking into the lions mouth, not just den. Mata, are you really going to tell me that it makes a difference?:

::I know. But . . . I just don't know::

::You're an Envoy. You're not supposed to have emotions::

::I know,:: Mata said with disgust. ::It must be all the time I've spent around you::

Muriel was laughing as she walked through the door to the office. “Mata, do we still have that footage of the bully episode?”

“Yes. I'll set it up for you.”

Muriel turned to her new charge. “I don't think I even know your name. Would you tell me, please?”

“Frederick, Miss.”

“Well, Fred, I'm Muriel. What I'd like you to see is an episode that happened at a human school, here in the city. There were a lot of bullies in the school. Older boys and girls that had failed one or two grades. I want you to see what happened to one girl. Here, sit down. These are the seats for some of my security detail, those not on duty. The five desks up by the window are for the active squad. Pick a recliner and sit, and we'll run the show.”

Fred sat, and Mata started the recording. This was from the network feed of the reporter on the scene, since it gave some good background and color, unlike the raw footage that the squads recorded. Muriel's face didn't show up until about halfway through, and it startled him when he realized that the girl sitting next to him was the same one that was pushing back the bullies to allow a squad to get between her and them. Then he saw the principal raise a gun and fire at Muriel, and her turn and look at the principal. The record replayed the scene in slow motion, and you could see the bullet stop a foot from Muriel's head. Then it went continued.

“That's you? But, you don't look any older, now.”

“I'm not. That was a couple of days ago.”

“But you've got more stripes on your sleeve, now,” he said.

“Yes, and the kids I just turned loose an hour or so ago hadn't any training at that point. Now, they have the same number of stripes. And they're all human but one. Clyde is an Envoy. The first Envoy to take the training, as a kid with restricted abilities, and find out what it was like to be human. The training needn't take long. A lot depends on the individual and their willingness to learn. My friends, the kids I trained were all my friends, took it as a challenge. Plus they challenged each other. They took their final this morning. That's what Fran was doing there when she was snatched. And she freed herself. Alone.”

“But, Miss”

“Just Muriel. The only real rank around here is that Ted is the boss, and he's put me in as second. Most of the Envoys seem to approve. They certainly cheered when I left here to go to lunch after being shot with five .45 caliber guns. The bullets stopped a foot away from me, without being crushed. I picked them out of my shield and gave them to my father. Mata, how about the RPG footage?”

“All we've got is raw. The media didn't get that or the missiles.”

“That should do. Bring them both up, if you would, please.”

Fred watched as a Rocket Propelled Grenade stopped one foot from the side of the bus, and stayed there during a wild ride to the Enclave. Then he watched a helicopter circle Enclave, and fire rockets that stopped one foot from the front doors, and the aftermath of that when Muriel brought in the President. When it was over, he just looked at Muriel, then looked

at the front doors.

“And you say you trained the kids to be able to do the same thing?” he stammered.

“Who do you think stopped the missiles. I was busy getting mad, then getting sane, then going for the President. Those kids, of which Fran is one, stopped them. They acted in an emergency by joining their shields in such a way that they held the missiles against the force of their still running engines. And held them until they could be safed and transported to a secure location.”

“Now,” said Muriel, “I’d like to show you something. Come on out here. Good. Now put a shield around me and hold me in place.” He did, and she turned and translated out of it about two feet. “Now, I’m going to put one around you. Try to translate out of it.” She wrapped and anchored the shield. He tried, but he kept running into it, and it wouldn’t let him free. “OK, that’s enough.” She dropped the shield and sat down.

“Fred, that’s what we’re offering you. How we do what we do. It’s up to you to decide if you want to learn. I can’t force you. I wouldn’t want to. Things learned by force turn out to be useless in the long run.”

“Oh, hey. I think the kids are coming back. Come on up to my office. You can see how they’re gong to get tutored for human school.” As they made it to her casual area, The kids came bursting through the door, very excited. They headed for the break-room and grabbed seats in no particular order, their Envoy security standing by their sides. Muriel’s security squads entered and 5 of them stood in front of the seats. The rest gathered at the side of the area, each focused on a different child.

Mata came over to Muriel. “One of the bright boys in research wanted to know why it took so long for us to dump the tutorial into you. When we explained how we did it, he just shook his head. He called us amateurs,” she said, with a chuckle. “Well, we were. It took one on one tutoring and about 5 minutes each for the courses for you, and left you unable to do much the next day. That’s why you had Sunday off. This is better. And we know because he used it on us to show us how to do it. It’s still one on one, but your squad mates that are acting as the tutors don’t have the information. The five up front do. They’re the same ones that trained you. The squad mates will link to the kids. The tutors will link to the squads and the whole dump will take about 5 minutes. But it’ll be compacted in such a way that it won’t really affect the kids. It’ll take about a day for it to unfold, but they won’t have that heavy feeling that you had.”

“How’s it going, Fred. Any questions?” Mata asked.

“Many. I don’t even know where to start,” He replied.

“Muriel,” Ted came in. “We’ve got a solution.”

“I didn’t even know we had a problem,” she quipped.

"Yep, but it just got solved. We're now a school of home teaching. You and your friends will be home-schooled here instead of going back into the system. The downside is that they want a baseline in order to determine how well you-all are doing. So there'll be a test. We're opening up one of the empty buildings and setting it up with desks and chairs for you. The downside is they want to pull the tests on Monday."

"I don't see that as a problem. The kids are getting the same tutorial I got, and it's age and grade specific, you said. So we should be up to date. Then we can start dumping in more advanced stuff, say, once a month, and we should each have a Master's degree by the end of the year." Muriel tried very hard to keep the smile off her face as she tweaked Ted. Mata failed completely, busting out in snorts, giggles and outright laughter as she realized what Muriel was up to. Ted just growled.

"You know you really got him," Mata managed to sputter out, "when he's speechless and all he can do is growl. Ted," she added as she calmed down some, "now you know what it's been like for me. I think her zingers are even better than yours."

"Yea, she's smart," he said. "Or at least some part of her anatomy is." Muriel just chuckled. "In any case, the tests would only be three times a year: beginning, middle and end. And you're right even if you are flippant. By the time they say you can stop going to school you should each be way ahead of the curve, and have a better understanding of subject material than others of your apparent level. You could easily obtain Doctorates in any field of study you chose by the time you're 16 or 17. We may have to come up with some sort of accreditation and syllabus in the future. You might want to think about that."

"Actually," Muriel said, "I'll leave that to wiser heads. I have enough trouble just doing what I do. That side of teaching is outside my abilities and interest. At least right now, especially when we're going from conflict to conflict without any breathing space. I'm more concerned with what I can do with knowledge than how to categorize it."

"You know," Ted said almost contemplatively, "that may be the key. Instead of categorizing knowledge by fields of study, categorize it by what can be done with it. I think I'll run it past some people and see what we can come up with. It would certainly go a long way to differentiate our methods from those of 'normal' human endeavors. Good idea, if we can make it work. Thanks."

All this time, Fred was just watching as people talked, taking in what they were saying and how they were interacting, as well as the subject material. Increasingly, his jaw dropped and he looked like he'd been hit in the head with a 2 x 4. This certainly wasn't the way people interacted in his experience. Taking jabs at each other? Not taking offense at what were obviously insults? Jumping on each others ideas and changing them? How could any structure, any organization hold together like this? But it obviously did.

Mata caught his puzzlement, and sent, ::Fred, there is an old truism: No plan survives the first encounter with the enemy. What you're seeing is an attempt to plan that isn't a plan, if you will. We're looking for holes in an idea. Constantly looking for weak spots to strengthen, levers we can use to push aspects that we want to see happen. Trying to find

things that people, human and Envoy, would find attractive and want to join and/or experience. Things that show us as different yet the same. At the same time, we're trying to teach Envoys to be human and humans to be Envoys. There's no real reason for them to be separate, and Ted's long range plan is that they shouldn't be. There's another truism: The best defense is an all out assault. What we're doing IS defensive. But straight defensiveness is a trap. You're always reacting to what the other person or group is doing. An assault is an attempt to read the others' intentions and hit that point, hard and fast. Sometimes it means doing blatant things, like Muriel's 'defense' at the school. She never attacked, but she won the war, there. Yet that very defense of hers was an assault, even though it wasn't an attack. And yes, she dreamed up the idea herself, and implemented it on the fly, changing as necessary to meet the situations as they developed. A plan that wasn't a plan. Something loose enough to allow flexibility, while the main purpose remained rigid.::

::The most effective military units on this planet run on that idea. The squads are given a goal, a loose envelope of rules to stay within, and turned loose. How they actually implement the action depends on what happens at the time, and they often have to improvise on the spur of the moment to attain their goal. Ted had that idea. But it wasn't until he recruited me to be her 'Security Chief' that he found out that he'd only seen a small portion of the idea. Muriel turned us both upside down. I was supposed to link to her, mentally. Instead, when I described what I was going to do, she linked to me. In one moment she threw out Ted's plan and adopted one that was faster and easier on her, and created a more solid application of abilities than we'd even imagined. And she did the whole thing in about 2 days of training.::

::And she's been surprising us ever since. She trained 13 people all at the same time, and in 2 days. And one of them was an Envoy. You know him, I believe. Clyde. How did she do it? Nobody told her she couldn't. We let her run with it. She knew what the goal was, and she found a way to achieve it. Period. Could it be improved on? Possibly. Probably. And she wouldn't bat an eye at making the changes, though she'd probably have something to say about the implementation. Do you begin to see what you're getting into?:

::Her shields are different,:: he sent. ::They're not standard shields. I couldn't hold her. And I couldn't get out of hers!::

::I know. When we taught her shielding we pulled a test to show her how they worked. Well, we thought we did. I had her shields backstopped so she wouldn't get hurt. But we really expected five .45 caliber slugs to rock her, and maybe even knock her down. She never moved. The slugs stopped one foot from her like they were in something sticky. Just stopped. Slugs from 10 feet away, traveling at over 500 miles an hour, and they stopped. And that much force never moved her.::

::Then she let on that her shields weren't like ours. We'll teach you how to make them. It's dead easy. Simpler than the standard shields we were all used to. And much more effective. She took our goal and implemented it in her own way, and rocked Enclave and Home with the information.::

:: When she trained the kids, she did the same thing. Establish a goal. Give them an

idea of the path to follow. Then turn them loose to find their own way to achieve it. It resulted in various minor differences in implementation, but they also showed that the end result can be meshed together, like when they stopped the missiles. It's a breakthrough in thinking that we never would have thought of. Even Ted only had a vague idea that something like that might be able to be arranged in the future. Then the future became now, and everything was turned upside down. Listen to her. She'll teach you. We'll all help teach you. Some of it might seem strange. Some of the things might outrage your sensibilities. Don't let it stop you. Go with it, see where it goes, it'll explain itself as you go through it, and you'll see why she does things the way she does. I think it's almost instinctive to her. Oh, and by all means, question. If you don't understand, ask. If you think there's another way of doing something, tell us. We may test it. We may have you test it. We won't discount something out of hand unless we know that it would be dangerous to you or us, and even then we'll let you know why.::

::This,:: he stammered, ;;this is all so unstructured.::

::Oh, there's structure there. But it's looser and at a higher level. Relax, you'll understand in time. Probably without even realizing it. You'll just find yourself doing it, interacting along with the rest of us. That's how this office and her apartment were put together from a blank, two story warehouse. She came up with ideas, I parceled them out to her security detail, then we walked away and did something else while they got on with it. In all, the actual work only took about a half hour. We've made some changes since then, when we saw weaknesses in the basic idea. Changes that were batted around between Muriel, me, and all four squads, to come up with what would achieve the goal. There may still be changes as we go along. Like Ted saying that he had found a building that could be used for the home-school tests. That's the thing about humans. Everything changes.::

Chapter 14

Crosstalk

(Wednesday evening)

The squad break-room was re-arranged a little to allow an extra chair for Fred. An Envoy to work with him was suggested, and roundly voted down by the squads. The unanimous decision was that he was theirs. They could supply the checks and balances to be sure that he wasn't mistreated. They'd adopted Muriel's attitude that she knew his past and didn't care. What mattered was how he acted from here on. The squads would rotate working with him, unless a very positive connection happened.

Fred was still numb. He'd been shown so much that he hadn't known about or hadn't believed. He felt he'd been lied to all this time about what humans were like and how Ted, and now Muriel, were trying to run rough-shod over the Envoys. The things he'd seen that a CHILD had done. Alone. Those were startling. But the banter and discussion he'd witnessed in Muriel's casual area were beyond belief. Didn't people need a firm leader to tell them what to do? Yet he'd seen the discussion start with an idea, and the idea change as people chimed in. It firmed up, closed obvious weak spots and even try to account for the ones they didn't see. A plan that wasn't a plan. How could people work that way. Yet he'd seen it in action on that screen.

One of the off-duty squad members moved toward him, and he began to tense. ::You're Fred, aren't you. Frederick, that is. But we all use nicknames here. It just seemed easier. I'm Carl.:: He knelt down by Fred's seat and continued, ::I know this is tough for you. If it gets too rough, let me know. Or Mata or Muriel or Ted. We don't want you mistreated. We want to help and teach you, yes. But no mistreatment. I seriously doubt that the squads will. We got read the riot act on that by Muriel. Oh, she was gentle and bantered with us. But we got the point. You're to be given every chance to learn what we know, and you know? I think she's right.::

::We won't run the forced training on you that Muriel went through, or even the kids. They needed to be brought into the system as quickly as possible. And, really, they were pushing us more than we were pushing them. You'll get trained at whatever speed you can handle comfortably. And please tell us if you want to go slower or faster during the process. Really. In fact, if you open up a little and listen for the squad you'll see what I mean.::

Fred opened his mind a bit, and was almost overwhelmed by what he got. ::No, no. Follow Muriel's pattern. Speed doesn't matter. But the order feeds on itself, and makes it easier to assimilate.:: ::But we can't show him souls unless we bother Muriel or Ted, or wait for the kids to come in and hope one of them will help us.:: ::Not a problem. We field-trip him, show him humans here in Enclave, or even outside. With two squads to support and protect him Muriel should let us.:: ::Definitely not. Not until he can protect himself, and that's third on the list. And if he showed up outside with even one stripe on his sleeve he'd be a target. That's why the first stripe only comes after a trainee can protect himself.:: Fred closed back

down to the single link.

::That's . . . a bit overwhelming. And they're talking about how to train me?::

::Yep. And how to make it as easy as possible. Fred, it's a whole new world out here. And Muriel's stood it on it's head more than once. So have the kids. They've impressed me no end. The squads fell in love with Muriel. She doesn't quit, doesn't give up. Drives herself harder than anyone I've seen, including Ted. Don't tell her that, though. She'd deny it. She thinks the world of Ted.::

::Oh, if you like I can help ease that overwhelmed feeling you have. Not change your mind or anything. Just allow you to push it back, all the things that have been thrown at you today so you can think for yourself. Or we can just wait for you to be able to relax, yourself. There's no hurry. Either way, if there are any questions, I'd be happy to answer them. Or any of the squad members. And if I don't suit you, you don't feel comfortable with me, then tell me or Mata or Muriel and we'll switch around until you find someone you can feel comfortable with. OK?::

::Um . . . I don't know what to say. I've never been in this kind of situation, before. Um . . . you said that you could push the feeling away without changing my mind, I mean how I think?::

::Sure. Would you like me to? Then you could walk around, talk to people, get to know them. By the way, that discussion you heard? It's become a null discussion. We aren't going to start training you until tomorrow, at the earliest. In which case the kids will be back. And Muriel says that probably any of them would be happy to help. Maybe even a lot of them, so you can see the differences. Oh, and she also said that she's available any time, if she isn't on a mission. Her parents might even be willing to help. But the final thing was that we won't even start until YOU are ready. And we'll let you know, all along the way, what's next and how we'll do it, so there won't be any surprises. And you can stop and start training at any time.::

::Oh. OH!:: Fred smiled, then looked over at Carl and grinned. ::That took a lot off of me. But if you can do what you said, I think I'd like that. It would give me a chance to see the place and people without feeling quite so out-of-place.::

::You got it:: Fred felt something in his mind. Not changing it, just relieving the pressure. Then he felt Carl disengage.

::Um, Carl, If it makes it any easier, you don't have to disengage from my mind. I know who I am and what I am, and what I've done. If, as you say, that's past, then it doesn't matter. But if it makes it easier for you, or whoever is my minder,:: he said that with a smile, ::then maybe it would be best. I don't want anyone thinking that I'm hiding something. I want to give this an honest try.:: He felt Carl's light touch on his mind, then forgot about it. It wasn't important. But it was a warm support, a friendly feeling that told him that he didn't have to do it all alone. There was someone to share it with him. It felt good.

Fred looked around the room. Without that pressure on his mind he was able to take in

what he was seeing. He was impressed. The office proper was at the front of the room with two large glass doors that looked like they slid rather than pulled or pushed open. One side was obviously a formal executive office, but it was open to the rest of the room. He remembered being in the casual area of it. Centered on the room and in-line with what he presumed was Muriel's desk was a less ostentatious one. He figured that was for Mata. The other side held five rather plain desks that he figured were for the active duty squad. Computers were everywhere. So were people. Talking or sending to each other, checking things on the computers, wandering into the break-room area to the kitchen and coming back out with one form or another of food. It was a very relaxed scene, not real noisy like he would have expected, but with an air of things getting done. He looked again at the screen on the wall at the front of the break-room, and wondered why it was there.

::We use the TV for news reports, what we don't get from the computers when we're on active duty. Or for sports. Some of the people like to watch sports. There's no accounting for taste,:: Carl said with a smile. ::Oh, those doors. They'll surprise you the first time you encounter them. They're panic doors. If we get called out, the whole detail can get through them in about 3 seconds. They whoosh out of the way. But they close slowly. There's a shield outside that's one foot away from the building. Kinda Muriel's signature. NOTHING gets closer than one foot to her. You saw that on screen. We had it at only 6 inches away when the missiles were fired at us, and the Kids stopped them. Muriel found out, and said to move the shield out to one foot. She also had it strengthened. It'll take an atomic blast, now. Yet it will pass air and people and select things like that without even noticing it.::

::The elevator goes up to Muriel's apartment. We don't go up there without an invitation. She needs someplace where she can be private or alone. It's a human thing. Some of it's a social-bred protection. Changing clothes, sleeping, times when a human might feel more vulnerable. Part of it is our respect for her. She needs to be able to wind down and just relax, sometimes. So we don't go up there unless she invites us. The two exceptions to that are Mata and Ted. Well, three exceptions. The third is an emergency. Then anyone can go up there to help her. And believe me, if something happened to her up there, there's be four squads up there so fast the walls would expand. Oh, the elevator is for her friends and parents that can't translate up there. That way they can come and go without having an Envoy with them. And her parents aren't real comfortable with translating.::

::Hard to believe this was once an empty two story warehouse, isn't it?:: Carl sent an image of what the place looked like before it was remodeled. ::Muriel and Mata spent about 15 minutes going over what would work and how to make it look. Generalized, nothing specific. Then they went upstairs to the blank area up there, and spent about the same time talking up there. In the mean time, we did the work down here. It was ready for her when they came back down. Took about the same amount of time up there to fix up her apartment. She was surprised, both times, with how fast we worked.:: Carl really grinned this time.

::We've done some tweaking afterward, on both the office and her apartment. Like a curtain to hide where she sleeps when she brings company up. Or the fact that we snuck in an extra chair for you.::

::Wanna bet?:: That distinctive mental voice could only be Muriel, who had come up

behind them. ::I knew as soon as you did it. The pattern changed. By the way, Fred, there is no assigned seating in the break-room. The only reason they TRIED to sneak it in was to see if I'd notice. You lost the bet, Carl. Guess who's doing dishes tonight. Pest.::

::Slave driver::

::Cheat::

::Human::

::Ooo. That's a nasty one. Picking on poor little me just because I'm inferior.::

Carl snorted. ::You're inferior like elephants are tiny, Beast.::

They were both grinning, and Fred felt a bit whip-lashed. ::Is it always like this?::

::Pretty much. I don't like being formal. Well, I am just a kid. And it's the way kids talk to each other. It defuses tensions and makes a joke out of things that might otherwise be taken as an insult or something. How about you, though? How are you doing? Carl treating you alright?::

::Oh, yes. He pulled the pressure off my mind so I could just look around and take things in. Oh, and I asked him to reengage my mind. Same with anyone else who's my minder. I don't want them thinking that I'm trying to hide something. And, somehow, it feels more comfortable that way. Carl's been real good about explaining things, like about the training. That went a long way to making me feel better.::

::Good,:: Muriel smiled, and suddenly he felt a warmth that he hadn't expected. ::No, I'm not in your mind. Not past the normal send/receive link. But sometimes human emotions slop over, regardless. You're training will start no earlier than tomorrow, but not until you feel you're ready to start. And it'll go at your pace, unlike the kids. You'll learn new techniques, but this isn't regimented. You'll learn your own way of doing them. I think, once you've done a couple, you'll find that they're fun. And the shock shouldn't be as bad as it was for me. I'd never done or even seen ANY of it. You want to talk about numb. I spent Sunday, after almost all the training, just trying to recover. Most of the time I spent in bed, sleeping. Had my parents a bit worried, I'll tell you.::

::Carl, did you show Fred my apartment?::

::Are you kidding? You keep lions up there to eat trespassers. NO WAY!::

::He's kidding, Fred. Come on up and I'll show you. Or, well, Carl? Will you bring him?::

:: Sure. Be right there. Fred, we're not stopping you from translating. We did that with Clyde when he came in. But we're not doing it with you. But we suggest that you wait until you see how we do it now before you try it again. Soon, friend, I promise. So let's go.::

Muriel had translated as soon as Carl had acknowledged her request. Fred, shepherded by Carl, joined her in the great room. The room was enormous. And had the largest table he'd ever seen.

::We're thinking of changing it, some, but we're not sure how, yet. The discussion is still going on. But one thing we figure is that no one should be more than across the table from someone. But others are arguing that it needs to be straight so everyone can see Muriel. Some of the suggestions have been a topological nightmare. But we'll figure it out.::

::This is beautiful,:: Fred said. ::And I can see how it would be private.::

::Yea,:: said Muriel. ::It's shaking down pretty well. And it's all soundproofed both ways. What happens downstairs won't leak up here and keep me awake. And what's up here won't interfere with what's going on downstairs. I can play music at a loud volume, and they don't even know I've got the sound system turned on. Why, I could even bring boys up here and have a real party, and no one would know.::

::Dream on,:: said Carl. ::Mata would be up here making sure you behaved. You're advancing too fast as it is. We can't keep up.::

::You're just jealous because you don't have a girlfriend.::

::Jealousy? What's that? Some human disease?::

::Yea,:: Muriel said, suddenly serious. ::One we hope to cure in time. By the way, that was a cheap shot. Even if I did set it up.::

::You're kidding? You think you can cure an emotion?:: asked Carl.

::It's not really an emotion. It's possessiveness. Greed, pure and simple. A 'you're someone I own' attitude. Well, that's for later. We have enough to worry about, right now.::

::Um, can I ask . . . ?:: Fred asked.

::Of course you can. You, of all people can ask. We've found most of those on the list and are watching them to see if they've got further contacts that you might not have known about. There are a few that we can't find. They're masking us somehow, I think.::

::Um. I may know how. Would you link deeper with me? I don't mean let me further into your mind. I mean come deeper into mine. I may have heard something. If you looked, you might see what it is. Also, you'd get a better picture of them.::

::Are you sure you want to do that? I mean, that would be invading your privacy or something.::

::No, it wouldn't invade my privacy. Though I'm only just learning what that means.

And, well, ma'am, if anyone deserves the right to look, you do.::

Muriel smiled in a tired sort of way. ::Do you have any idea how strange it is for a 12 year old girl to be called 'ma'am' by someone as old as you are? That's why I have people call me Muriel. It's at least a compromise between 'ma'am' and 'hey kid'. OK, help me walk through in the right direction.::

It took a couple of minutes, intense minutes for Muriel though it caused no discomfort to Fred, then Muriel sent, ::OK. I see what you mean. I'm going to send the information to Ted and see what his bright boys can come up with.::

She went out of focus for about five minutes, and Fred got the feeling that there was an intense conversation going on. Then suddenly she snapped back. ::You were right. And they're working on countering it right now. Thanks, Fred. That helped a lot.::

::You're welcome, Muriel. And any time you feel the need, I won't mind. Your hob-nailed boots aren't too uncomfortable.::

Muriel looked startled for a second, then burst out laughing. ::Score, Fred. SOLID score. I see you've been learning bad habits from Carl. Keep it up. Oh, I'll HAVE to tell Mata and Ted about that one. They'll roar with laughter. Caught in my own web. Priceless.:: She was still laughing, and Carl was grinning like a cat. And suddenly Fred understood what the banter and teasing was for, and relaxed further. He could even feel some of the pressure that wasn't really there recede further.

::Carl,:: he sent privately, ::I think I almost made a mistake, there. Can you help me keep from antagonizing people?::

::I'll help. But that was well done. It was exactly what she was worried about, that she'd been too rough searching. You made it just absurd enough that she realized you were teasing. By the way, that's a good sign. You're starting to relax and just go with it. Well done. That score is going to be the talk of the squads for weeks. Ted and Mata are usually the only ones that can keep up with her teasing, and even Ted's been made speechless by her. You just pulled a stopper on her that even Ted hasn't been able to do. That's why he'll laugh.::

Chapter 15

Here Comes the Judge

(Wednesday night - Thursday morning)

Fred spent the evening and night with Carl, getting to know other members of the security detail. He'd never really paid attention to the fact that Envoys had such diverse personalities. Or, maybe it was just these, because they were in such close contact with a human, and mimicked the way that they thought Muriel wanted them to act. And the activities. Sports he didn't understand at all. What was the point of people pounding on each other, trying to move a ball on a field? Or in a big room in a building? It seemed pointless.

Then there was food. Fred had never tried eating before, and some of the things Carl suggested just seemed strange. Strange taste, strange texture, rather unpleasant. But others held a fascination, an attraction. Popcorn, for instance. Heated kernels of grain that burst apart, with some sort of animal byproduct and a mineral on them. Yet he kept wanting more of it.

Music was another thing. A lot of it just sounded loud and harsh. But then somebody put on something that seemed to grab at him. It had structure. First a theme, then a different theme, then back to the first theme that was somehow the same yet different. Pleasant. It just seemed to drift, yet get more intense, then relax back. And all played on a single instrument – something called a piano.

And as he got to know the squad members and learned about things that interested humans – and come to find out, Envoys – little bits of the day would wander out of that pressure that Carl had relieved, earlier. Slowly, the room wasn't so alien, and he could see the order in the way it was laid out, and the reasons for keeping areas for certain generalized purposes. It began to make sense. Even the movements, random though they seemed, started to make sense. Those that were on duty were watching screens, studying reports, discussing points with their neighbors in that area of five desks at the front. And sometimes they'd get up and get something from the kitchen. Occasionally talking with those that were off-duty about things that had happened that day or earlier. Relaxed.

Fred listened to some of the conversations – these Envoys didn't try to hide anything from him, and he was welcome to listen in to any conversation whether audible or mental. And suddenly he realized that what they were doing only appeared to be relaxed and aimless. The ones on duty were going over reports to see if they could find patterns in them. Patterns of behavior in individuals, patterns of events and how they related to other events. They were going over current news to see if any of the patterns were starting to show up, there.

And the supposedly relaxed way that some of them would go and talk to those off duty, it was to get their input into the events and patterns that they saw. Even the ones that were off-duty were thinking of some of the events without really thinking about them. Just letting them settle in their mind unless their sub-conscious tossed something up that appeared to be

out of place or not fitting a pattern. Then they'd discuss it with others to try to figure out it's importance.

Patterns. The music that Fred had found strangely pleasant had a pattern, and differences in elements of the pattern. Differences that should have appeared startling, yet actually seemed to flow naturally from the original pattern element.

And suddenly he saw the point to sports. The moving of the ball had a purpose. It was like a formal war, but in miniature. Two sides, ways to win points that would have corresponded to battles won in a war. And the reason some of the Envoys liked them was the uncertainty of how the battles would turn out. And it was all determined because of the abilities of individuals. Those in support, acting as guards defending or attackers putting pressure on them. Of individuals that could use that support to stop the overall battle plan or further it, depending on the ones doing the attacking and those doing the defending.

And then a picture came into his head of one frozen moment from the scenes Muriel had had him watch. Muriel, turning her head to look at the school principal, with a bullet a foot away from her. Suddenly he had to sit down. He had to study this HAD to study this, because suddenly it felt important. He looked the scene over. The principal. The teachers. The bullies, ringed around Muriel and unable to touch her. And he began to realize. This was a war. A war that was much like the games that humans played on fields and in big rooms in a building while others looked on. Looked on? No, more than that. Not really a support, not really a mental willing for one side or the other to win. What was it?

He looked at that frozen moment, again. Muriel. The principal and teachers. The bullies. The kids, backed off but watching. The kids. The looks on their faces. Fear on some, anger on others, hope on a few. Emotions. The spectators of the sports suddenly intruded. Their faces. Emotion. Then he replayed the look on the faces of the members of the security detail around him as they had watched. Emotion. And those on duty. It was less obvious, but yes, it was there. Emotion.

Envoys were supposed to be aloof. Apart from everything. Like a single, pure note. Notes. The music. Patterns. EMOTION. The composer of the music was creating emotion through sound, through music. Emotion to share with others. Emotion, like the teasing that humans did to counter emotions that they had. No, not just that they had, but that others around them had. And suddenly he understood why what he had said to Muriel about the hob-nailed boots had had the effect it had. SHE'D been afraid that she'd hurt him. What he'd said was ridiculous, outlandish. But just the thing that touched that fear and made her – no, helped her – realize that it was ridiculous. THAT was why she laughed.

Was emotion all that it was? No, he didn't think so. But it was a part. And patterns were a part. And differences in people were a part. Suddenly, he realized what he was doing. He was processing, or maybe reprocessing, the information that had been thrown at him. Looking at it in different ways, looking for patterns, and emotions were part of the pattern. And Envoys were learning to have emotions. The wonder of it. A whole element that Envoys weren't supposed to have, because they didn't have bodies that drove emotions. Yet these Envoys did. Without bodies.

Then, Ted's plan made sense. He was helping Envoys to gain something new, something fearsome and wonderful and mind-expanding. And the Envoys were helping him to discover that people really weren't that different. No wonder human lives were so short. So much was packed into them that they needed time away from it to process it all, to make sense of it all. It was also the reason for their sleep. Games? Could games be another factor? Stepping away from whatever they were working on so that their mind could work on it in the background? And Muriel had given her security detail down-time in which to play. To do other things and not think about the important things. Yet they still were thinking about them in the background, and bits would slip through that they go and talk to others about. Because others, from a different outlook, had other information that would make sense.

Duh! The reason that Ted and Muriel listened to their squads and each other. Because others had different outlooks, different ways of looking at things that prompted different possibilities. And that way they got a better idea of how to deal with things. No single person could examine all the points from all the angles. But many people, looking at something from several angles, could do it together, then share what they saw and what they thought might be a way of dealing with it. Fred wondered if they even knew they were doing that, or if it was something instinctive.

::Beginning to make sense, now, isn't it?:: Carl said, beside him. ::No, I wasn't snooping. You're face said it all. You began to make the connections. Someday, maybe, you'll share what you saw, and what connections you found. But I will say this. This being something like a half-formed human child is part of what makes Ted and Muriel different from others, and makes it possible for them to learn and do what they do. This down-time to let everything settle in, so that things that seemed obvious before may lose importance and other things stand out. When you lock yourself into thinking about one thing, you can miss the many things around it that may be even more important.::

::Yes. But it's more than that,:: Fred said. ::That thing some of the detail did with the kids. That tutorial thing. How is that done?::

::I don't know, but I know how to find out,:: said Carl, as he got up and moved toward another Envoy. They spoke, mentally, for a couple of minutes, then both returned to Fred.

::Fred, I'm Betty. I'm one of the ones that has been tutoring the kids. What's up?::

::I think I may have stumbled on something. No, nothing to do with the rebels. This is more like what Ted and Muriel do, and why. No, something . . . :: Fred stumbled a bit, then said, ::I would like to know how you tutor the kids. How you put so much information into a compact form that the other can open up and absorb.::

Betty looked at him, puzzled, then said, ::Can I ask what brought this on?::

::I was trying to make sense out of what I've seen today. And I began to see connections, patterns, in how you Envoys – and Ted and Muriel – work together . . . interact . . . behave. And I think I see how it works, and why it works. But it's too big for

words.:: He stumbled again, then said, ::Look, can you look into my mind, maybe a little deeper than we talk, and see what I'm trying to get a handle on?::

::Are you sure?:: asked Betty.

::I think this may be important. It's beginning to make sense to me what Ted and Muriel do. And I think it's bigger than even they know. And Muriel's already walked through my mind, and Carl is linked closer than surface thoughts. But I'm not sure how to tell others. I think the only way is to dump my experience to them, and let them see for themselves.::

::Oh. OK, let me take a look. Show me what you saw.:: she said. Fred opened his mind, and tried to show her how he made the connections. Suddenly she broke off.

::Oh, my. Wait. I'll get the others. You're right, it's big. And I think it's an explanation. Or certainly a part of one. And others may have pieces of it without knowing it. Let me get the others. I can't put this one together alone. I'll need their help. That is . . . ,:: she suddenly realized that she was running all over poor Fred, ::. . . that is if you don't mind opening up to five of us.:: It was half a question.

::I'll do it. I've been telling people that I don't mind. I know what I did. And if there's something I can do to make up for that then it's worth whatever I have to go through,:: Fred said.

::We WILL try to be careful. We don't want to hurt you in any way. So, PLEASE, let us know if we are so we can stop and ease the hurt. Please?::

::OK,:: Fred said.

Betty went unfocused for a moment, then seemed to snap back. Four other Envoys converged from various parts of the room, grabbed chairs in the row ahead of Fred and turned them around so they could all face him.

::Fred, we're all going to link with you. I'm going to ask Carl to go a bit deeper, too, to support you and alert us if he sees the potential of our causing you pain or grief, so we can try to make it smoother and easier. I'm not going to kid you. This is going to take a lot of work. The little I passed to the others gave us an idea of just how big this is, and we all think you're right. This may be the explanation we've needed to go forward in a more organized way. It won't be easy on you. And if you need to take a break from time to time, we'll understand.::

::What we're going to do is get that information you have, with your help, and try to relate it to who/what you are as well as organize it so others can understand. Then we'll record it in the compressed form to dump into others. Actually, we'll dump it on the think-tank in Home, to see if they can make sense of it, and to add in other information about Humans and Envoys. In short, I think what you've stumbled on is what Ted's been telling us all along, but that none of us really thought about. We just did it. And I think it's even bigger than you've come up with. More complex. But I think what you have is the way in to untangle that complexity. So, when you're ready . . . ::

Fred nodded his readiness, and then began . . . nothing. Or so it seemed from outside. It looked like 7 people just looking at each other. There was a certain tension there, obvious to those around, that something intense was going on. But life went on around them without disturbing them. People continued to study reports, get popcorn and soda, chat with each other, do the things that were normal to Muriel's office routine.

It took hours. Oh, there were breaks from time to time. People got up and stretched, walked around, got snacks, listened to music. In general, detoxed from the strain. Sometimes it was Fred that called a temporary halt, apologizing for the delay only to be reassured that it was quite alright. Other times it was the Tutors, themselves who felt overwhelmed and had to step back. But finally the tension broke. The Tutors sat back and looked at each other.

::Fred,:: Betty said, ::we apologize for it taking so long and being so hard on you. Where we had to go . . . I mean, some of what you felt was so sub-conscious that we had to go deeper to follow it than we had thought. I hope we didn't hurt you, or go where you wouldn't have wanted us to go . . . ::

Fred broke in, ::No, you were gentle. And we had to go where we had to go. And it was we. You didn't just go in by yourselves. You followed the directions that I showed you. So if you were in too deep, it was my fault. I'm sorry it took you so long. I didn't think it was that big.::

::Oh, Fred. You've just hit us with a block-buster, a breakthrough. You were right. I think you only have part of the picture, but it's a key part, a way in to begin to see the connections. It's going to take us a little time to put it all together, but I think we can. Then others can build on it.::

::Um . . . ,:: said Fred, ::would it be alright if I got a look at it when you're done?::

::I don't see why not,:: responded Betty. ::They're your thoughts, after all.::

"Morning, all." Muriel's voice jarred them back into the real world.

Carl stood up and said, "No training for Fred, today. He's had a rough night."

"No, Carl," Fred responded. "I just need a little time to get my energy back. Maybe hold off a little, but I'd like to go forward as soon as I can."

"What happened?" Muriel asked.

"Fred made a breakthrough. We've been up all night trying to put it together for the bright boys in Home. I think he's come up with the reason Ted is so keen on getting Envoys and Humans together. It has something to do with connections and patterns," Betty said. "The breakthrough was the easy part for him. What took so long was going in and pulling all the sub-conscious threads that created the realization. And I think it may even change the

way we think about thinking.”

“Oh,” said Muriel. “But Fred, you're alright? They didn't mistreat you?”

“Oh, no. It was long and hard, but they were gentle and considerate. It was mostly just the strain of trying to find all the threads, all the patterns I could see. And the gaps that I can't see, yet.”

“Ah, OK, no problem. We're not holding you to some sort of schedule. We can start any time you feel strong enough. We can't start until the kids are here, anyway,” Muriel said.

“Muriel,” one of the active squad said, “Judge Adams is coming in. Reception is bringing him.”

“OK,” said Muriel. “Everybody look busy.” Everyone laughed. Muriel had sent a sequence of kids at desks in school suddenly looking busy, when they really weren't, when somebody important came around. “Has Ted been alerted?”

“Yea, he's outside changing the sign on your door.”

Muriel looked, then went outside and looked. It now read 'Office of the Ambassador – Muriel – Training and Troubleshooting' in three lines with her name in the largest size letters. Muriel just looked at Ted and shook her head. “Really, Ted,” she said, “padding the job description?”

Ted just chuckled. “Well,” he said, “You're definitely shooting something.”

“Ted! Ah, young lady! Good morning!” rang out a voice, and Ted and Muriel turned around to see Judge Adams coming toward them with an escort in tow. He was grinning like he had a secret.

Hi, your honor,” said Muriel. “Welcome to Enclave! Ted was just repainting the sign on my door.”

“Ah. Oh, I see. Training and troubleshooting, huh? But really, is it appropriate that you should be split apart every time someone goes in or out?”

“Ted. He's your friend, isn't he?”

“Well, yes, of course. Why?” asked Ted.

“Because he has your sense of humor,” she replied, dryly.

“I . . . OH! . . . Oops,” stuttered the Judge. “I assure you that I meant no impropriety. I DO apologize.”

“Don't worry about it, your honor. It's just been one of those mornings,” she said. “Not

much going on, right now, at least until my friends come in. And no training at least until then. Fred needs to detox some. He had a long night. Something about a breakthrough. Betty can explain to you, Ted."

"In the mean time, your honor, we can show you the office and my apartment." She walked toward the doors, which obligingly whooshed out of the way.

"Oh, I say! That's wild. Do they close as fast?" the judge asked.

"Oh! No. The motors operate the closing. The opening is caused by air compressed by closing the doors. I'm not sure I understand all of it, but it works very effectively," she answered.

Ted quietly sent to one of the Envoys to take the sign off the door and transfer it, in a somewhat reduced size, to the lower right side of the window in front of Muriel's office area.

Muriel pointed out the areas of the office to the judge, explaining why she'd decided on the various aspects, and acknowledging the work of the squads in creating it, and in tweaking it as time went on. Then they trooped up to her apartment by way of the elevator – the judge not being partial to translating – and showed him her apartment. Muriel was glad that she remembered to make her bed. Then back down in time to see the kids come charging in. They were their typical boisterous, rambunctious selves, grinning like they'd been just let out of school. Which, in a sense, they were.

The off-duty squads quietly gathered them up and took care of settling them down, answering questions they had about their skills and how to handle them. And Fred noticed all this, how such a seemingly disorganized office could run so efficiently because the individuals knew what was needed and just quietly did it without any orders being given. He also noted the affection with which the squads treated the kids. And the respect with which the squads and kids treated each other. He'd have to tell Carl to tell Betty that there might be more that needed to be added to what he'd already given them.

He looked at the kids. Then looked again. Seeing souls was just something Envoys did, without thinking about it or truly noticing it. But Fred, still keyed from the night before, DID notice. His introspective experience caused him to look at things more from the way Humans might look at them. And humans, by and large, didn't see souls unless they were trained. The kids' souls were gray. He glanced at Carl and a few others. White. Or nearly so. And back to the kids. Different shades, but gray. He looked at Muriel and Ted. Grey. He looked at himself. Dark gray. Well, that figured, considering what he had been.

::I thought you weren't going to train for a bit,:: Carl sent in his mind. ::And here you go and figure out the first stage without anybody's help.:: He chuckled. ::Well done. You noticed the difference and understand the significance.::

::Yes. And I think we need to add relationships to the mix of what Betty and the others got,:: Fred replied. ::We can talk to them later.::

Chapter 16

News, and Information Analysis (Thursday morning)

"This is remarkable," said Judge Adams, seated across from Muriel on the couch. It had been a bit of a humerus argument about who would get the recliner. Muriel ended up in it as a result of Ted's insisting that it was her office, and she was co-leader of the Envoys. The judge got a kick out of the by-play. "And you did this yourself?"

"Uh, no. I came up with the ideas, and Mata told members of the squad what to concentrate on. Actually, they all joined in working on it. They took my ideas and ran with them."

"Well," he said, "you should congratulate them for me. They did an impressive job. And so have you. With everything. And are those some of the kids I saw at the school?"

"Yes," said Muriel. "They're my friends. I invited them here to see Enclave and where I had my office. And, well, one thing led to another and they ended up trained like me. They just got their last stripes, yesterday."

"And you trained them?"

"Yea," she snickered. "All at one time. Ted only had me to worry about. I think he had the harder job." And she giggled.

"Actually," said Ted, "she might be right." And he grinned at her.

"Well," said the judge, "as pleasant as this has been, I didn't just come to see your office. I thought you might like to know what's going on that you're very capable squads might not have found yet. The principal is going to trial. Arguments have been submitted by both sides – that's what we call briefs, because they are a brief description of what each side will maintain in court, and try to prove. The principal tried to get charges leveled against you. Yes, the same charges that I quashed when that weasel from State came by during your confrontation. The judge ordered them to produce evidence of the charges, particularly in light of the media coverage of the event. They withdrew the charges."

"The teachers were charged with conspiracy of a number of things," he added. "Unlawful restraint, harassment, assault, endangering the welfare of a child, things like that. They were also charged with attempted murder, as co-conspirators in the commission of a felony that involved assault with deadly force. They are not happy campers, right now."

"The bullies have been arraigned on charges of aggravated assault, assault with intent to do bodily harm, as well as the lesser charge of harassment. Some of them are being charged as adults."

"The bad part of this is that you may be called to testify in any of the trials. I know a man, a lawyer and head of a law group, that would represent you and your friends. And, by the way, he happens to approve of the Envoys so you shouldn't have any trouble with dealing with him. Some of his law group are women, so if any of the girls or you would be more comfortable dealing with them there should be no problem. Now, I said you may be called. It's also possible that you may not."

"There's also the media frenzy that can go on around trials such as this. And I've heard that at least some of them are going to try to paint you, Ted and the Enclave in as poor a light as possible. They tried that trick when the news was originally released about the school and the missiles. You'd have thought that they would have learned, but a couple of inside sources tell me that they haven't." The judge finally stopped, looking disgusted.

"There is some good news, though. And I was asked to bring it, on the assumption that you would have shot anyone from State that tried to come in." He opened his briefcase and pulled out some papers and a black booklet. "Letters of accreditation and such, and your U.S. Diplomatic Passport. Customs and Immigration is still pissed that they can't restrict you to entry points, like any other 'aliens', but that's their problem. It was set up in the treaty that due to the nature of your transportation and the fact that you weren't bringing anything into the country, that you had free access. It's also in the treaty that any Americans have free access to Home. But since they would have to provide their own transportation nobody sees that as likely."

Muriel looked at Ted, and raised an eyebrow. "Nope, YOU tell him. I'm not sure he'd believe me," Ted said.

"Your honor . . . Judge Adams . . . sir . . .," sputtered Muriel.

"You're going to tell me that you've been to Home, aren't you?"

"Well, actually, 13 of us have made trips under our own power and ability," Muriel said. "If it helps, we're all underage." She held up one arm. "The fourth stripe is the one we get for making the trip, solo."

"Thirteen of you. All kids. Your friends, I presume."

"Yes, sir."

A strange look came over the judge's face. Then he started to shake. Then sputter. Then outright laughter. Loud and long. When he finally came up for air and wiped his eyes, "Oh, this is too much," he said. "I suppose I should have seen this coming, though. But let me get this straight. Home is, if I get the reference right, the place that humans go when they die. Right?"

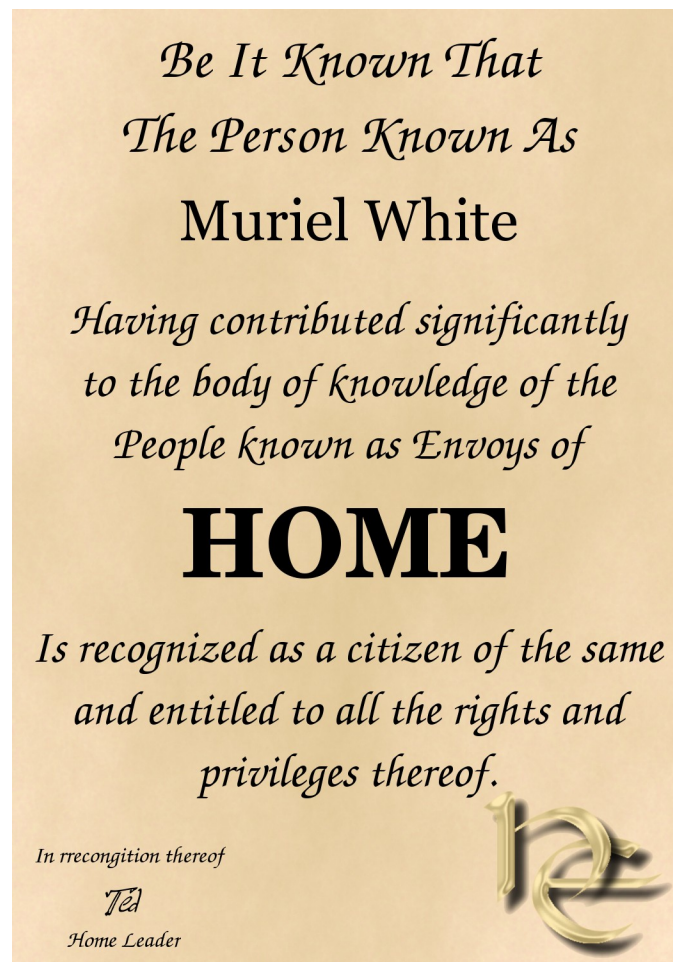
"Yes, sir. I can vouch for that. A friend of mine died in an accident a year ago. On my first trip I visited with her a bit."

"You're serious!" he said.

"As a grave, sir. And you can ask my friends. Each made the solo trip and met her, individually. Of course, this was after I took them all up myself and they had a chance to get to know each other again."

"Humans. In and out of Home under their own power. Alive and in body."

"Of course. Mastery of the dimensions is necessary to what we do and what we are. Each solo trip was monitored by an Envoy to be sure the trainee made it and didn't get into trouble. They were allowed to bail out a trainee, but not help them or interfere with their trip in any way unless they ran into trouble. We have their records, of course. Then they received their fourth strip and their Home passports. Oh, and their fifth stripe, which is that they are balanced, mentally, and capable of carrying out their duties. They're full citizens of Home, just as I am." Muriel pulled her Home passport out of her 'no-pocket' and opened it up for him. On the right-hand side was:



"Each one of my friends has one of these. They can't be duplicated or forged, simply because of the 'floating symbol' in the right-hand corner. It's more than just a 3-D effect. It's

more like a hologram, but solid.”

“So, you really do have dual citizenship, and it's not just a dodge.”

“Yes, sir. It doesn't affect me in any way, other than to say I have the backing of Home and can speak for the Envoys. I'm still an American citizen.”

“Well,” said the judge, “there is a little more than that to it, but in essence you're right.” He started chuckling. “I'd like to meet your friends, if I might. I want to see those stripes, myself. And I'll need their names and such for their paperwork. And the President's going to kill me. He thought it was bad enough there was one of you. But twelve more? I don't think he believed that you could do it. How long did it take to train them?”

“Two days,” said Muriel. “I had help from my squads, and of course they each have an Envoy security guard. Only one, at the moment, because they don't have any active positions with Enclave or the Embassy. Just enough for their protection.”

“Two days,” mused the judge. “I take it that you did the training of them, then. And all at once. Now I see why your sign said 'training and troubleshooting'. I already understood what the 'troubleshooting' was. Now I see that you're an accomplished trainer, too. Well done, young lady. OK, can we assemble them somewhere where I can get a picture of them to prove to the President that I saw them with my own eyes?”

“I don't see why not.” ::Mata, clear the front of the building and get the kids out there for a picture for the judge. Their guards can be there, but not right with the kids.::

::On it. They'll be there when you get out there.::

“My security chief is setting it up, now,” said Muriel

Ted added, “We'll provide a computer-readable record of the solo trips the kids made. I should mention that the target area was once called the square before the hill of the throne. There is no longer a throne or a hill, and the only judgment was that of the kids, themselves, coming into their rightful heritage. They are their own judge, now.”

“Symbolism? Do the kids know that?”

“I doubt it, but it wouldn't matter if they did. The religious aspect of it no longer exists, and it was more of a quirk of mine. Plus it was the one point I knew was large enough for them to use as a target, even if they over or undershot a little,” Ted said. “But I thought you'd appreciate the significance.”

Muriel, Ted and the judge walked out to the front of the building. The judge noted that the kids seemed to be standing on risers that weren't there. But he'd already seen exceptional things, and was only startled. He figured that there was probably some simple explanation that only involved magic to understand, so he didn't bother trying. Mata was at the front, waiting.

“Your honor, this disc contains the individual pictures of the children, along with their names. It also has a flat-scan of them formed up, with their right hands raised, so you can see their stripes. This one contains the records of their trips to Home and back. Those records are split-screen with the guard on the left and the child on the right. One record, the last one, the child was grabbed. Her guard couldn't find her and came back for help. Another Envoy was sent and came back with her but let her make the trip alone so she could get her stripe. That record has a short section where there is no guard's view. The girl got out of the trap herself, alone, translating back to the point where she should have been in Home. I've included Muriel's as the first record, but not the mass visit to their friend. And this folder contains the pertinent information on each of the children. Now, if you'd like to meet them, they'd be honored.”

“Kids,” Mata said, “you can land now, and make room for the judge to walk between your rows.”

Like reviewing the troops, the judge started at the left side. Each child introduced him or her self and offered her or his hand. The judge was able to confirm for himself that each child had five stripes on its sleeve, one of them in a colored braid, as he congratulated them. As he moved away, the child turned and left the area. The last one in the row turned the opposite way, moved off, and the row behind advanced to that line. One would have thought that they had practiced it for days. Yet it was entirely impromptu and very impressive.

::Carl,:: Fred sent, quietly, ::Who's the person up there shaking hands with the kids?: he asked.

::Him? Oh, that's Judge Adams, an old friend of Ted's.::

::Really? Check the soul,:: Fred responded.

Carl looked, then did a double-take. ::TED! Check the soul. It wavers.::

Ted looked, then alerted Bart, which meant he alerted his security detail. In moments the site was surrounded with both Ted's and Muriel's squads. As the last of Muriel's friends left the area Ted turned and grasped the judge's hand.

“Now, you'll tell us who you really are,” he said, softly.

Mata retrieved the materials she'd given to him, and stored them in a 'no-pocket'. Muriel looked puzzled, then glared, and suggested that her friends' Envoys check them for any marks or tracers. When the first one was found, Muriel growled, and her eyes blazed.

“Those are my friends you marked. Not nice,” she said. “Perhaps I should explain to them what you did, and turn them loose? Do you think you would survive it?”

“Never mind, Muriel. I just did the unthinkable. I dug through his mind and found out who he was, who he answers to and who answers to him, and where they all are. Bart?” and

he sent location and identification, “bring them here, if you would, please.”

There was a crack of displaced air, and fifty individuals stood bunched together behind the 'judge'. The illusions were stripped away, and instead of fifty-one 'fine upstanding citizens of the country' there stood fifty-one Envoys with black souls. They didn't stand there long. Muriel and Ted struck at once, and they dissolved en masse. With them, the marks or tracers also disappeared on the kids.

“Those were the ones we were looking for,” said Ted. “The ones that were hiding and we couldn't find them. They'd masked as ordinary, prosperous citizens. But we know which ones they were. I'm afraid there's no hope of finding the originals. The 'judge' was the key figure, and how their organization knew our movements so well.

“Were they the ones that grabbed me?” Fran asked. “I never did get a look at them.”

“No,” said Fred, who had come out behind her. “No, I'm afraid not. But I think I know who might have.” Fred sent the information directly to Ted and Muriel.

The rest of the kids came out and gathered around them. “We want to help. We want to be a part of this. The last three times it was Muriel that was the actual target. We were just, what's the term? Collateral damage. This time, it was us directly.”

“Tommy, I don't think this is a good idea. This isn't something that should be done in anger or for revenge.”

“You're right, Muriel,” he said, “this shouldn't be revenge or anger. Not any more than putting down a sick dog would be. You've trusted us with some awesome abilities. Have we misused them? No, and we won't. We understand the repercussions. We also understand the risks. This is something that needs to be done by the ones affected. This needs to be done by us. All of us. That means you, two, too. You were also marked.”

“Ted?” asked Muriel.

Ted looked around at the kids. At twelve resolute faces. Not angry. Just determined. Some were a bit sad but determined nonetheless. “Yes. I'll teach them. They're right. This is their fight, too.” He reached to contact the twelve and discovered that Tommy was the focus for all of them. They were all linked through him. “Here's the when to kill,” and he sent them the same brief dump that he'd given Muriel. “And here's the how,” and he sent them how to do the twist that would dissolve a soul. “If you're not sure you understand, then don't do it. No one will think less of you. Just come to me for a better explanation.”

Mata spoke up, “The actual location is a pocket dimension accessed through a 'no-pocket' that's man-sized. I'm not sure how you'd reach them.”

“I do,” said Tommy. The same way we take an object out of a 'no-pocket'. We use a miniature shield, like a force-field, to grab the item and pull it in. Like this . . .” and he pulled a baseball bat out of the air without touching it. Then sent it back.

"Muriel," Ted said. "It's a good thing there are only five stripes. Otherwise we'd have to put sleeve extenders on their uniforms by the end of the year. Tommy, PLEASE pass that information through your Envoy. That needs to go to all the Envoys." And the kids grinned. It was better than tweaking 'the man'. It was upstaging him. Ted smiled back in a tired sort of way.

"So, Mr. Tommy, do you have some ideas as to where to bring them?"

"It's just Tommy. Thomas, actually, but then everyone would think I doubted them." That got a chuckle from the kids. They'd caught the reference. "And yea, I think we should bring them out at the spot where they snatched Fran. Kinda symbolic in two ways. There used to be a hill just beyond the square, wasn't there?"

"Yes. And you're right. Good choice."

"Ted, can I ask a question?"

"Of course, Tommy."

"Can the entire pocket dimension be pulled in, then dissolved?" Tommy asked.

"That depends on how big it is. But I think we can deal with that. Let me think about it a bit," Ted said. "If it can, or we can somehow shrink it, then we can put a bubble shield around it, dissolve the pocket dimension, and contain them. Good idea. In fact, it plays right into your method of picking a 'no-pocket'. Because the bubble would already be in place."

A very male voice sounded from behind him, "Not necessary, sir. You're not going alone." Ted turned to see Bart, behind him. And behind him more Envoys than he could count. "Your squads are coming to help with containment. Oh, and a few volunteers. The kids are popular. What isn't needed for containment of the 'individuals' will dismantle the pocket dimension once you've translated the miscreants to the square."

"Then all it needs," Fran said, "is bait. Me. Muriel, I need some instruction in what you did in the theater. The glow and grow, and the blazing eyes."

"Only if I go with you!"

"I'd be happy to have you with me, Muriel. But it's me they need to see. I've got some shields that will give them fits. They can't be grabbed or encapsulated, even by our shields. I know. The kids and I tested them. Oh, here's how they're done," she sent the information to Muriel and Ted in a burst. "Be careful with them, testing them. They can send quite a jolt to whoever is trying to grab you."

"Ted," Bart broke in. "I think we should delay going after them a bit. The analysts are going over some news. Some of it is media hype. But some of the information actually concerns you and Muriel. Her crew probably has it, too. I've noticed they're fast. I've GOT to

learn how she manages to get so much out of her people.”

“Bart,” Muriel quipped, “You’re just not built right to handle it.”

“He’s right, though,” said Mata. “I was just coming to tell you. We’ve got trouble. The press is after us again.”

Chapter 17

To See Ourselves as Others See Us (Thursday morning)

"Fred," Carl said, "how did you know about the judge's soul?"

"Oh, you were talking about the difference between human souls and Envoys. So, when the kids came in, I took a look at them. Then I took a look at Envoys. Then I took a look at Ted and Muriel when they were in her office with the judge. His looked a bit strange, but I wasn't sure why. I looked at the kids again, and saw the variation between them. They're gray, lighter than Ted or Muriel, but not much, and there are slight differences between them. But the judge looked darker, yet he didn't. It wasn't until he was outside shaking hands with the kids that I saw the waver in the color. He was trying to mask his real color, which was black."

"Well! That was well done. And by warning me, and my warning Ted, you just saved us all from potential trouble. I've let Muriel know, and Mata, her security chief. You've met her, haven't you?" When Fred shook his head, Carl went on, "We'll get you to meet her. She's nice. Very protective of Muriel, but easy to work with. In the mean time, there's a couple of things that you'll need to learn, to protect yourself. And I think we should do that as soon as you're up to it. Do you mind wearing a uniform, like the kids do?"

"Um . . . what's the difference between theirs and yours?"

Carl chuckled, "There's no difference in the uniform, itself. What's different is that the kids, and Muriel and Ted, have stripes on theirs showing that they have achieved some minimum qualifications. Ted took his, originally, simply so people – we Envoys – could quickly distinguish between him and an Envoy. Then he OKed the continuation of the idea for Muriel. So far, there's only one Envoy that has stripes."

"Yes," said Clyde, "and the reason I do is because Muriel has compassion. Real compassion. The willingness to let someone's actions and behavior be their own judge. Ted stripped me of most of the Envoy power, and was going to turn me loose, limited and pretty much unable to defend myself. Then one of her friends ripped me up one side and down the other for the way I'd behaved. And Muriel offered to let me come here and learn, like any human. I did learn. And earned the stripes the hard way. I had to learn what it was to be human and limited. Learn what emotions were. Learn to judge myself. What Carl is asking is if you have the guts to learn and earn the stripes."

"Yes. I will learn. But why don't any of you have them?" asked Fred. "You do the same things that they do."

"We lack some of the judgment of humans," Carl said. "Well, not judgment, maybe, but the balance that makes that judgment valid. The balance that shows up in the soul. Neither

black or white. The real difference between right and wrong. The reason for emotions like love and hate and so-on. What real forgiveness is. What that fifth, colored stripe indicates.”

“Oh,” said Fred. “Yes, I will wear the uniform. You will have to teach me how, Carl. Oh, if I’m supposed to learn how to be human, are there any I can talk to? Be around to see what is different? Ask questions?”

Muriel stepped over to them and said, “Yes. Me. Ted. Any of my friends. You may also see and meet others from time to time, but I can’t predict that. And you can tell them as much or as little as you want about yourself. Just the fact that you’re in uniform and learning will be enough for the ones I named.”

“You did good, today, Fred,” she went on, softly. “You did what was needed. And it looks like you jumped the gun on your training. Don’t feel bad. So did I. So did the kids, though they don’t know it. And it looks like, as soon as you’ve got some of the basics down, that you’ll get a second stripe along with the first. Can I show you something?”

“Yes, what?” asked Fred.

“Just close your eyes and look through mine. I’ll link to you and push what I see.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. Then they flew open and he stared at her. “It’s gray!”

“Yep. That’s what I wanted you to see. Your soul is changing. It’s turning gray. Not far, yet. But obvious to anyone that looks. I mean really looks. And why we treat you the way we do, with understanding that mistakes happen. Sometimes there’s nothing we can do to make up for them, and we just have to live with them. Now, I’ve got to scoot. Both Ted’s and my analysis teams have information for us.”

“Oh, just a minute. Something they may not have realized. The ones out front? They aren’t on my list. I didn’t know any of them. They may be a second front – the ones that grabbed Fran. And I never heard of any Envoys that had a pocket dimension.”

“So,” Muriel said, “There may be three. Good. We’ll add that to the mix. Thanks.” She smiled, then left.

“Is she always like that?” asked Fred.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Pretty much. And what she just did with you she did with her friends. It was part of the way she learned from Mata, the first time. But Mata used it only as a teaching tool to show her how to see souls. Muriel uses it to show the person what they look like. From some poem, ‘to see ourselves as others see us’. There’s a difference between what we think of ourselves and what others think. There are ways that you can do that for yourself, in time. The easiest is to create a mirror. But those are for later. And by then you may not feel the need to do so. And, by the way, you just got part of your training from ‘the boss’. That’s exactly what she did with the kids. Not like any training you’ve ever heard of, is

it?”

“That was training? But it was just showing me something. Something about myself . . . oh. I'm slow. Of course. Once you learn to see what others see, you learn what you need to learn. And you learn that maybe you aren't as bad as you thought you were.”

“Yes, or worse than you thought you were. That's a risk, of course. But everything that humans do is a risk. Some just take more than others. If you'd like to learn more, I think we could use the kitchen for some of it. I can show you the shield that Muriel came up with. It's not difficult, and since you already know shielding it shouldn't take long at all. A quick test of them and you'd be protected against just about anything that could be tossed at you.”

They moved to the kitchen, where people moved around them without disturbing them. True to his word, Carl taught him how to reach power, and got Fred to the point where he was comfortable with the new style shield in only about 10 minutes. Then the kitchen suddenly seemed to vacate, and Don appeared, with his baseball bat, already swinging. It hit Fred's shield and stuck.

“Yep,” Don casually said, “I'd say that passes. Might even be stronger than Muriel's.”

“You . . . you tried to hit me!”

“Uh, huh. Quieter than being shot by 5 guns at once.” Don took hold of the bat, again, and Fred released it. It was promptly put in a 'no-pocket' in mid-air. “Gonna teach him about the uniform next?” Don asked. “Can I help?”

::Don't even think about using Muriel's apartment! She's busy. Put a temporary curtain up around the kitchen area, and tell people that it's off limits for about 15 minutes, or until the curtain is down.: Mata sent.

The warning went out, the curtain went up. Clyde joined Don and Carl in helping Fred, and the total time was only about 10 minutes before he could successfully switch from uniform to anything else he could think of. Then the curtain went down, and Fred emerged in his new uniform.

Muriel was there to meet him. “Put your arms up so you can see them,” she told Fred. He did, and two stripes appeared on the sleeves. “Well done, Fred. Very well done.” And the Envoys and cheered and applauded.

Fred was overwhelmed. This was acceptance beyond anything that he could have imagined. A couple of simple tests passed and he was cheered? He was treated as one of them? Unbelievable. And Carl was patting him on the back and urging him to join the crowd. He found a seat, or one found him – in the daze he was in he couldn't tell – and was immediately surround by members of the detail and kids. Not oppressively, but in a sort of camaraderie. One seat was vacated, and suddenly Muriel was sitting there.

“Fred,” she said, “time to get your feet back on the ground. No, no. Not literally. It

means to come back to dealing with the real world. We have a problem, and maybe you can help us. That list. Were there any other people on it? Or was there anything else that you can remember?"

"No, ma'am"

"Please. Just Muriel. I'm only 12. I'm too young to be a ma'am."

"Sorry, Muriel. It's just . . . You're so far above me, like my boss. I'm not used to calling someone important by their first name. No, no more people. But, if you sorted them by the type of job they do and put the names in the first column, and the types of jobs in the second, and leave me a column to put notes in, I might be able to figure something out."

"Mata," she spoke and sent, so others could see what she was doing. "Sort by job type, one column names, one column job types, one column blank . . . ? She said she'll have them as soon as the printer can print them out."

"Now, I wasn't kidding when you said that you'd done well, today. You just went through two levels of the training in less time than my friends and I did. OK, so you had an advantage of still having your powers, so you could jump the gun a bit, not like poor Clyde. But to jump the gun and make a solid identification at once was great. That realization that the judge wasn't Judge Adams is what got you the second stripe, by the way. You acted to defend us even though you hardly knew us at that point. And are still struggling a bit, I think."

"Oh, oh. Incoming. And here's the list," she finished up, handing it to him.

"Hmm. A red marker, I think," Fred said.

"Pull it out of your 'no-pocket'," said Carl.

"Oh, of course. OK, this group is out of the picture. They're the ones that were with me, from Home. This group. That's all business. Not the top, but near it where they can influence business and pass out bribes without getting caught."

"Plausible deniability, I think it's called," Ted said from behind him.

"OK, and this group is media. A small group, but all the visible media is actually run by this group. And the last is political leaders. In all the cases not the people at the top. But the people that run the people at the top. The ones that actually make the plans and strategies. The most dangerous is the business group. They're the ones with the money to buy the rest of them. Media publishes what they're told to publish. Fail, and they get their funds withdrawn. They may be in the form of advertisements and such, but they are more likely in the form of bribes to the power in the media. Same with politics. All the current legislation is bought and paid for by business. If I were doing an analysis, I'd be trying to tie payments from business to media and politics. That would point to where the attack would be coming from. I'd also check any communication records. I take it these people can't just send to each other, so there must be a physical link somewhere, probably run by a business, so there

would be records.”

“Bart's running the financial side, Muriel. Your crew is looking into phone records and Internet emails and social sites,” Ted said. “I kept them tied into the conversation.”

“Fred,” Ted said, coming around in front of him, “may I ask what you did for your group?”

“Oh, I was just the records keeper,” said Fred. You could almost hear the thud of falling chins from Muriel and Ted.

“Oh . . . ,” said Muriel. “Just the person that keep the organization organized.”

“Um, yes, you could say so. It really wasn't very much. I didn't know very much about the actual operation, but I had to know the general direction of things. Uh, I think there was supposed to be a religious side to it, too. But they didn't get much. Not nearly as much as media and politicians did. I do know that the group I was with was paying out a lot of gold to business. I think business was the key to feeding the rest. Wait a minute. Can I see the list and, please? Yes. That's what I thought. This name sounds familiar. If I remember right, this one in the media, they'd go to him first. Something about once he was paid off, the rest would fall in line. Muriel, it really would go better if I just let you in. You're very gentle.” An image of hob-nailed boots appeared in Fred's mind and he let it leak across. And he grinned. It was just unfortunate that Muriel happened to be drinking a grape and berry juice combination made in Enclave.

Muriel sputtered, then cleaned off her uniform. “Beast. That's twice you caught me. And with the same reference. I'll have to remember to not be drinking anything when you're talking.”

“What?” asked Ted. So Muriel told Ted about being led through Fred's mind, worried about being too rough, and being as gentle and careful as possible. She sent the same to Mata at the same time. There was a minor explosion from the front of the office, and Mata started cleaning off her computer screen. It would appear that the grape and berry combination was popular. Ted was roaring with laughter.

“Fred,” Ted said, “you're going to fit in very well, here,” he managed to say between chortles.

“I'm just glad,” Muriel said, dryly, “that these uniforms are so easy to clean and don't take a stain. Ted,” she added, “I think we're going to need a squad for him. And I'm going to need a bigger office. And just when I was getting used to my apartment, too.”

“That shouldn't be a problem,” Mata said, coming into the throng. “There's nothing behind the building but a vacant lot, and you could do with a balcony patio. Some minor rearranging there and you're set. Downstairs grows enough to hold desks for a squad, and more seats in the break-room.

"Hmm. I think I see what you mean," said Ted. "Give Fred a squad of analysts. Good idea. That is, if it's alright with Fred."

"Me? A squad? But . . . I've only got two stripes!"

"Oh, that'll change in time. You'll have four stripes before you know it. And they'll be security for you when you go out," Muriel said.

"You know, Muriel, you really created a compact and flexible office, here," Ted mused.

::I heard that!:: sent Bart. ::OK, I'll look into it and have some suggestions for you when you get back. May I also suggest break-room seating for your horde of friends, Muriel?:: Bart was sending to everyone in the squad-room.

"Muriel," said Mata, "I came back here because we may have found something. This name that Fred circled. It seems that he's actually connected with the other media. So all the rest of the names in that section are, in some way, responsible to him. That's why he seems to control it. Ted, how good are you at strong-arm scare tactics?"

"I think I can manage. How are the financials for the business group?" he asked.

"Horrible. Without the influx of funds from the renegades they may go under," Mata replied. "They're not keeping up with the Internet Revolution, and were hanging on by suing everyone for patent and copyright violations. Most of them bogus."

"Better and better," Ted said. "Looks like I might be out of the office for a while, then. Muriel, you'll be the resident Ambassador while I'm gone. We'll put a filter on the Enclave to keep business and media people outside, for a while. We don't want to keep it on too long, but I think I see where the next threat will be and it won't be physical this time. Mata, make sure the squads know that NO ONE from those groups gets to Muriel. Not until we get a favorable atmosphere, here, again. The media's been bordering on scandal sheet garbage, lately, about us. They may decide to go over the line and try to promote rumors."

"When you say 'us' you actually mean me, Ted," Muriel said. "I know. I've seen some of it. And to think that there's supposed to be a free press in this country. This one is bought and paid for."

"I think we can help with that," Mata said. "We've had blogs up since you started training. Not really doing anything except giving a general positive attitude about Enclave. But we can expand that to suggest that the media is trying to make Muriel look bad simply to sell copy. Yes. I think that will work. We'll see what else we can come up with, too. Timed to coincide with Ted's attack on the head of the snake."

Chapter 18

Bankruptcy of the Fourth Estate (Thursday morning and afternoon)

"Hey! You can't go in there!" Ted ignored the comment by the irate secretary and kept going. The door ahead of him opened without his help, and closed behind him. Muriel and her friends had worked on getting him dressed in a casually formal style that screamed 'RICH!' without looking out of place on a normal office worker. Calf-length boots, dress pants in gray – the only gray he wore – and blue shirt with a blue woven pattern tie. A leather sport coat was what set it off from the normal office worker. Oh, and of course a briefcase.

"Good morning, Mr. Palmer," Ted sang out. "I'm here to make you an offer you can't refuse. It would appear that your outside funding has suddenly died. Well, such things happen, of course. Had you come to us, originally, you might be in better shape. As it is, and I think you'll agree, without outside funding your organization and many others like it will no longer exist."

"I don't know who you are," said Mr. Palmer, "but our funding is fine."

"No," said Ted casually while sitting down. "I'm sure it isn't. You see, I'm the reason that your funding died. Oh, I'm sure you could carry on for maybe a week. But after that it would be bankruptcy and closed doors. In the mean time, your organization would be vilified, certain indiscreet accounting practices would come to light, and certain illegal practices would be noted for further action by the appropriate authorities." Ted looked around. "It's a nice place you've got here. It'd be a shame if something happened to it."

"You're using all the clichés of a mob enforcer out of a bad movie."

"Yes," said Ted. "It would appear that I am. I suggest you call your money man and find out where your check is."

Mr. Palmer growled and made a phone call. The results were not pleasing to him. "OK, he doesn't answer. Not even an answering machine. What do you know about it?"

"Oh, that's simple. The people you were dealing with were renegades. Not the 'voice of the people', if you get my meaning. My organization discovered their activities and who they were, and took appropriate action. All legal, of course. All strictly according to the rules. They are no longer in a position to help you. We are. For a price, of course. But you should be used to that."

"And now, I suppose, you're going to tell me the price."

"Nope. I'm going to offer you a ten thousand dollar retainer to make sure that my terms are met. We DO have means to recover it should you default, of course. Means that I don't

think you'd appreciate.”

“Blind?” said Mr. Palmer. “You've got to be kidding. State your terms, and I'll decide whether or not to go along with you.”

Ted sighed, perhaps a bit too dramatically. “Very well. It's come to our attention that, following an episode involving a young girl at a school, and a bunch of bullies, that you have raised certain questions about her and the group she's joined. Questions without substance or evidence. Rumors, if you will. And lately those questionable practices, practices that are in fact libel, have moved over to the group itself. The reason is plain. The renegades paid you to do it. You and all the other media. Those activities will cease. In fact, you will indicate in your public reports that they were wrong, and you'd received miss-information. That's simple enough, isn't it? Just no more bad press for Miss White or the Envoys. You might even find that there are honest stories that could be written concerning them.”

“Yea?” said Mr. Palmer. “And what connection do you have with them?”

Ted just cocked his head to the side a bit, and allowed a red glow to blossom in his eyes. “As I said. This is an offer you can't refuse. Oh, and there's one other thing. I suggest you explore other business practices. Litigation is NOT a viable business practice. It only accelerates the demise of your, shall we say, 'empire'?”

“I see,” Mr. Palmer said. “But I still haven't seen the money.” Ted placed the briefcase on the desk between them, the clasps facing Mr. Palmer. “There's the retainer. Oh, and you can keep the briefcase, too. One final payment will be made on completion of my suggestions. I understand that you have a number of 'straw' blogs and websites in addition to your 'legitimate' media outlets. I'm sure that you wouldn't neglect them. When these actions have been met to our satisfaction, go out to the Envoy Enclave and ask for Ambassador Muriel. She's in charge of Training and Troubleshooting. Any Envoy can direct you to her office.”

“Ambassador Muriel? Muriel White? SHE'S an ambassador?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Ted. “Fully accredited. And she acts on behalf of both humans and Envoys in that capacity. A bridge, if you will. A bridge that the leader of Home has been looking for for a long time.” Ted stood up and turned to the door. “We'll be looking for you.” He stepped toward the door and never reached it.

On the other side of town, Muriel – in uniform – was conducting the same sort of discussion, but without the money. The upshot was that she didn't care if the business succeeded or failed. But that, without the money, they would surely fail, and that litigation would only bring them down faster. However, if they chose to come to Enclave and talk with some of the Envoys, they might, and stressed 'might', manage to weather the change in business methods. But they would have to hurry.

Ted was even less polite to the politicians. He started with the head of one of the major political parties and pointed out that their funding had stopped. And that, in addition, there

were certain questions about their connections with various business that, if they came to light, would result in the recall of a number of prominent politicians, the decimation of the organization, and a general public feeling that perhaps that party couldn't be trusted. He suggested that this might be averted by changing their policies. Immediately and publicly.

Muriel's analysis detail - well the temporary one. Fred's hadn't been set up yet – had discovered the organization and head of the organization of churches that were most vocal against the Envoys. And Muriel got to play. She used a variation of 'god mode', larger than normal, bright, and with ridiculous wings and grabbed him right out of a meeting. She took him to the square and showed him the vacant lot where the hill of the throne had been, and let him know on no uncertain terms that all that he was preaching was a lie. In addition, she let him know that, if he died physically today he wouldn't go to hell. There wasn't one any more. He'd simply cease to be due to having a black soul. Then she brought him back as blatantly as she'd grabbed him. He was weeping when he got back.

She was giggling when she got back to the office. "That was fun," she told Mata. "I always wondered what it would be like to be an angel."

"Actually, not all it's cracked up to be. And those wings! PFFFT!," was the reply. So you put on the whole show?"

"Yep. He was weeping when we got back. I think I destroyed his whole faith. Sad, really," Muriel said. "But I did point out that worshiping and praying to something that didn't exist was a useless waste of time, and that his opinions didn't come from any deity but from the inside of his own mind. And if it didn't stop, steps would be taken. Also that, as things stood, he wouldn't exist after the death of his body. There'd be no resurrection for him. I think we'll see a change there. Wait a minute! What happened here?"

"Oh, that. We're simply implementing what we'd decided before. Expanding your office for Fred's section, and creating your private patio. They should be done in a minute or two. Fred's squad is here, and he's linked to them. From their side it's just the customary surface link. But he insisted that they deep link with him. They're already pouring over information, and you should see the fur fly. He's come up with elements that we hadn't seen before. That's one organized mind. He sees things in patterns and connections. That's how he made his breakthrough last night, just from watching the squads interact."

"It looks like you're doing something different with his seating, too."

"We are," replied Mata. "We were going to set up a desk next to mine for him, and the squad like your on-duty squad is. But he suggested a circular desk with the computer screens embedded in the desk, tilted for the people to see easily. And I actually think that for him it would work out better. As soon as the squads get through moving the walls and break-room seating, well bring it and his chairs in."

"We need to think of where to send him in practicing translating, here on earth," Muriel said. "Then on to Home, and he can get his third and fourth stripes."

"He's also been talking with the kids and learning about the balance. His pattern matching and connections played heavily there. I expect that in the next week or two he can get his fifth stripe. And he's as excited as a puppy with a new toy. I think this is going to work. I didn't think so, before. You've never taken on someone who's soul was as dark as his. But I think that was because of the circumstances he found himself in. It's beginning to resolve now, and it keeps lightening up. I don't know if it'll ever get to the level of most Envoys, but it will at least reach that of a normal human."

They moved over to Muriel's casual area. "I do have some good news. The websites that the media set up have recanted. In fact, they've come over to our side. 'Information just received have shown that . . . ' sort of thing. And they've included not only the original report on the school episode, but the raw footage from the RPG and missile episodes. The blogs are starting to come around, saying that they got bad information to begin with, and starting to correct it. One news outlet has already apologized for miss-information, and corrected it."

"So Ted was successful," Muriel said.

"Yep," replied Mata. "Nothing from business and churches, yet, of course. But a couple of the politicians are beginning to question the stance they'd taken concerning Envoys. It looks like it's all coming together."

"Now we only have one more front to address," Muriel said, tiredly. "So, when's he due back?"

"Should be any time, now. I'm surprised that he isn't in already. Want to take a break?"

"Not until the office is finished, so I can 'ooh' and 'ah' over what they did," Muriel replied.

"Now you sound like a kindergarten teacher."

"Sometimes I feel like one."

::Get the squads in front of your office, Muriel,:: sent Bart. ::Ted's been grabbed. I'll meet you there with his squads. He'll give us where to go in a minute.::

There was a whoosh of the doors, and everybody in the office literally flew out and formed up. Bart was there before them, but only just. ::I've GOT to get me doors like that,:: he said. ::OK, listen up. Ted was grabbed by those renegades in the pocket dimension. He was grabbed when he left that politician jerk. He said that he had Fran's new shield configuration, and it worked. They tried to squeeze him when they brought him into that dimension, and it knocked them all out. Apparently, high voltage direct current does some nasty things to soul bodies. OK, he wants us to meet him at the square. Here's how he wants us placed. You kids go back into the office with Fred.::

::The hell with that. We're coming,:: said one of the kids. ::We're in this, too!::

::Bart, I'll take my squad back in and lock everything down until Muriel and her squads get back. We'll be fine,:: Fred said.

::OK, kids. But you'd better follow orders,:: said Bart. He passed out positions, then gave the signal and they were gone.

When they got to the square, they found themselves surrounding a group of Envoys bunched together in the center of the square. Some of them looked like they were just beginning to rouse from their shock, and the combined squads and kids threw up a bubble shield around them similar to that used for the missiles. Then they waited.

After a bit, the Envoys came out of it and managed to stand up. Clyde, who had come with the kids, sent to Ted that one of them was a shiny black soul. Ted didn't even hesitate. That one was dissolved before he could even regain his feet. The rest were given the standard choice. Learn or die. Each refused to learn. The massed Envoy squads and kids dissolved the bunch all at once.

::The pocket dimension needs to be dissolved, too,:: Bart sent. Ted gave him the coordinates, and he and Ted's squads were gone. They came back a few minutes later to announce that the job was done, and they all returned to Muriel's office.

Ted stopped outside, looking at the buildings on either side of her office for a bit, then came in and joined Muriel in her office casual space. Muriel's squads went back to working on her office, and shortly it was finished. Muriel and Ted admired the work and congratulated Fred on the organization of his squad. He grunted and went back to what he was doing. Then they went upstairs and saw what was done to the apartment. Not much was changed except in the kitchen, which the squads studiously resisted her using. That was rearranged a bit to allow for the door to the patio. And what a patio. There was a grill, recliners, table, small pool – not enough to swim in, but enough to cool off in.

“How would you feel about having some next-door neighbors?” he asked her.

“If they don't have loud parties at night, I don't see a problem with it, why?” asked Muriel.

“Because I was thinking of having something like this for me. Next door. That way we aren't commuting to each others offices all the time. What you have here is fantastic. It's functional, it's elegant where it needs to be, it's dynamic, and it's flexible. I like it. I told you that, before. But you've proved that it's even better than I thought. I think I'd like to have something like it. Besides, It would look better to have the two ambassador's offices next to each other.”

::Reversed? Shared wall?:: asked Bart.

::Yes, I think so.::

::One hour,:: sent Bart. ::I'll let you know when it's finished.::

"He moves fast," Muriel said. "He's already getting the walls up. Why reversed and shared wall? Not that I mind, just curious."

"Well, two reasons, really," said Ted. "First, by reversing the floor plans and using a shared wall, like a firewall, then essentially we have one building. And all the utilities like water, sewer and electric, can be run through that wall. You already had the utilities that way, and on the left wall, because of where the bathrooms were placed. The elevator is on the left, so we can use the same shaft, just different tracks. Two elevators, but only one tower."

"Well," he went on, "The other reason is that it shows people that we're the same but different. We're both ambassadors, we're co-leaders. But we have different functions that we're best at. Yet, at the same time, like the building, we have one purpose."

"Neat," she grinned. "You work in symbology as well as logic."

"You imp! You knew the answer already!"

"No, only part of it," she said. "I didn't know about the utilities, but it makes sense. The symbology I knew about. I want to see if the dumb human male knew." Her grin was wide. "Sound baffles out here as well as in the wall, so we can have parties without disturbing the other person. Privacy curtain on the outside guard-wall, if we feel the need to use it. Shields, of course. Probably the whole building as well as individual offices and apartments. Oh, privacy curtain but no guard-wall between the patios. We might want to have parties together, where we use the whole space, but other times want more privacy. Separate but equal."

::Good idea,:: put in Bart. ::I'll see to it::

"How do you do it?" Ted asked.

"Do what?"

"Now you've got MY security chief jumping to your command."

"Oh, nonsense," Muriel said. "All I did was acknowledge that he had good ideas, then built on them a little from things I saw, and he acknowledged that what I suggested was good, too."

"I think it's more than that," Ted said. "He respects you, you know. He's seen what you've done with your squads and your friends. And even your enemies. He's trying to be more like Mata. And there's always been a rivalry there. There's something different there, and I'd like to know what. I know it works, and would like to be able to do it, myself."

"There are two ways to go about learning. You can learn by watching, asking questions, stuff like that. Or you can allow a deep link. One that works both ways. But I'm not sure I'm ready to let someone human that deep in my mind. Mata is, of course. But she respects my privacy and is beginning to understand it. But there are things that I think would

shock you if you found out. And would certainly embarrass me.”

::Mata, Ted says that Bart's trying to learn to be more like you. Have you suggested a deep link?::

::Muriel, I've suggested it. But he's trying to tough it out. He's being a man.::

Muriel busted out laughing. Ted looked at her, quizzically, but she just waived him away. She managed to stagger to a recliner and collapse on it, but the laughter rolled on. Finally, in fits and starts, she managed to relate her conversation with Mata. “He's being a man,” she said, and started laughing again.

Ted had to puzzle it out. Envoys didn't have gender. So there shouldn't be a difference between Mata's and Bart's way of thinking. But suddenly, there was a different behavior. In both of them. But in Bart it was coming out as the human male 'don't ask for directions'. And then he got it. And Mata was the exasperated female. And he sputtered and began laughing, himself. And through the laughter, he began to see what it was that made Muriel different – that made her the teacher she was. She was linked to Mata, and it wasn't just the surface link. It was a deep link, and attitudes, behavior, things that made Muriel a girl and a teacher came through the link. Likewise, things that made Mata an Envoy – the logic, the wonder, the respect for the other person's privacy, the lack of judgment – leaked back. The bridge that he'd been looking for had always been in his grasp. All he'd had to do was open up to Bart. To stop judging himself as harshly as he was. To judge himself more as Envoys did. To accept that Humans make mistakes. And live with it.

::Bart?:: he sent, quietly, softly. ::Would you like to have the sort of link to me that Mata has with Muriel?::

::Would you want to do that?:: came the return.

::Link to me, Bart. And I'll link to you. Deep link.::

And, somewhere, in the distance but quite close, and not audible, there was a cheer.

Chapter 19

A New Training (Thursday afternoon)

::It's a good thing that Bart got his crew organized and the plans laid out,:: said Mata

::Why?::

::Because he's going to be busy for the next few minutes sorting out Ted's mind. He should be done about the same time that Ted's side of the building is finished. Just guide Ted over to a lounge and let him set,:: Mata added.

::I'm going to leak across some of you to Bart, too. Oh, nothing private. HOW you think, not WHAT you think. I think it'll settle him down, some. And hopefully, he'll pass it to Ted. A direct link between you and Ted would be . . . well, let's just say that you aren't ready for it. And I don't think he would be, either.::

::Mata, where's Muriel?:: Betty said. ::There's someone at Reception asking to see the Ambassador, and I know Ted's busy.::

::I think I know who it is,:: Muriel said. ::And it's me he was sent to see. Is there a way to mask the new construction?::

::Done,:: Mata said.

::Good, then translate him to outside of my office and walk him in, and sit him in a chair. I want him to see the sign on the window. I'll translate in from the side of my desk. Must keep up the image,:: Muriel quipped.

::Muriel,:: said Mata, dryly, ::you're nasty.::

Muriel was still grinning when she translated in a minute later and went to her chair. "Mr. Palmer."

"You're a girl. A kid!" he said, looking up.

"Right on both counts. What else do you notice," she said, putting her hands together and bringing her index fingers up to her chin, thereby prominently displaying the stripes on her sleeves. Mr. Palmer just shook his head, rather dazed.

"Mr. Palmer, my name is Muriel. If you noticed the sign on my window, it says Ambassador. Does that help?" she asked. "This is my office. Over there is my on-duty security squad. Behind them my analysis section. And, of course, break-room and kitchen for my squads."

“Wait a minute. Aren't you that girl that was in that thing in a schoolyard?”

“Very good, Mr. Palmer. Yes, I was. That was my second stand against bullies. But this doesn't tell me why you're here, and what we can do for you.”

“I thought some guy was the Ambassador.”

“Mr. Palmer, Ted, the head of the nation known as Home and Ambassador to the United States is currently busy. I was recently made co-ambassador due to the training I received and subsequently proved that I could pass on. Training that only took a total of two days for myself and those I trained because of advanced training techniques. Now, if you're simply here to try to 'get a story', then you'll have to excuse me. There are things that I should be doing. If, however, you have something that we can help you with I'd be glad to listen.”

“Um . . . the guy that was in my office said something about coming here to learn how to make changes in changing times. Then he turned around and disappeared.”

“Yes, Mr. Palmer. I think we can probably help you. It'll mean talking with you about your business, what you do, how you make your money. Oh, and due to the nature of your business, being media and involved with getting news out, how honest your journalists are in fact-checking. I'm sorry about having to add that condition but, considering recent developments, I'm sure you'll understand why I insist on it,” she said. “Honesty is important to us. As for Ted disappearing . . . well, we are busy. More busy recently than was the case before. And travel time takes so much out of the day. He had other appointments to attend to.”

“Um . . . well it's all very complicated. And some of it involves Copyrights. I mean the man that was in my office – was that really Ted? - said I'd have to stop litigation. But people are stealing from us,” he said.

“Yes, Mr. Palmer. That was Ted. He felt that he'd make a better impression on you in civilian clothes than in uniform. That you'd just slough off what he said if you realized that you were talking to the head of a foreign nation and Ambassador to the United States. I can't imagine why. And as for the litigation, well, over half of them are for simply linking to the story on your website, so you're still getting the hits. The rest seem to be for a ridiculously small number of words or what would be considered 'fair use' by a court of equity. In fact, you've had over ten lawsuits rejected by the courts for those very reasons. And how much have your cohorts taken in, net, from such litigation? Not enough to pay for the lawsuits. No, you really need to stop the litigation and start thinking.”

Palmer's jaw dropped. “How do you know so much about it? You're only a kid!”

“I had some very good tutors,” Muriel said. “As to how we know – we have methods that the CIA, FBI, Homeland Security and the National Security Agency haven't even dreamed of. But, as this involves Home and the Envoy Enclave, we're not subject to their

limitations in either technology or law. I do notice that you have deposited that money and transferred it to an offshore bank. Quite a tidy sum, there. Does your boss know that you've been skimming from the bribes you took?"

"This is outrageous! You're just a kid! You can't know about such things!"

"Actually, she can and she does," Ted said, entering the office and taking the chair next to Mr. Palmer. "And more, like the mistress you've got stashed in an up-town apartment at your expense, and the gifts you've given her. Now, I think you've wasted enough of her time. And mine, come to that. One of the Envoys will escort you back to your car, now. DO let us know when you decide that you want help, won't you." He said it as a statement, and one of Ted's squads helped Mr. Palmer to his feet and translated him out.

Muriel leaned back in her chair. "Do you realize," she said, "That I've been involved with you for less than a week, and it feels like a year?"

"This is the seventh day. But you've already had a day of rest," he quipped. It earned him a dirty look.

"How's your office look?"

"Perfect. Come see. Then you can see my apartment," he raised and lowered his eyebrows in imitation of silent movie villains. Muriel just laughed.

They very prosaically walked around to his office. It was literally a mirror image of hers, already occupied and active. There were differences, like his analysis team was set up like the active squad. His desk and paneling were darker – subtle things. But essentially a mirror image. "Remarkable," she said.

His apartment was laid out like hers, but was more masculine. Shelves held mementos of various things. There was even a bear-skin rug on the floor. The dining room, like hers, had a large table. But one addition to the great room was a side table by his recliner. "I'd rather eat in here, when I'm alone," he said.

"Interesting idea," she said. "I might put a table there, myself. But I usually eat with members of my squads. Not business, just teasing and joking, and stuff like that. Kid-stuff. They seem to enjoy it. And, because of the way we interact, I don't have problems with 'boss-employee' stuff I've heard about. They seem to respect me in a different way. I think it's because it's not 'fear of losing the job', but more like they were family and I'm the little sister."

They elected to translate back to her office. Ted looked around. "Yea," he said, "I can see what you mean by family and little sister. You come in, and there's covert looks to be sure you're here and all right. Fascinating."

"Yes. I know. And it's nice to have. Mama tigers in varying sizes and shapes."

"Oh, Muriel," Fred came up. "I think we have something. Something that didn't show

up before. One of the actual leaders of this mess appears to be a politician of sorts. Not an elected official. Appointed and approved by Congress. It's the head of the CIA, and he was close friends with the Secretary of State. I don't know how he was getting the information on you, but he was passing it to the Secretary of State. We have email records. Coded, but it was an easy break."

::Bart,:: Ted sent. ::I hate to keep you busy, but we need a sweep of the entire compound, the lunchroom where Muriel decked State, and her office as soon as possible. Don't disturb any bugs, but back-trace them if you can.::

::On it, Ted. And it's no problem. A squad will be showing up at Muriel's in a few minutes.::

"It's against Federal law for the CIA to operate inside the United States. They may quibble that this Embassy isn't inside the U.S. But a similar codicil in the Treaty we have bars any covert surveillance in the Enclave, or any Enclave, as this is private property as well as an Embassy," Ted said. "Due to the wording of the Treaty, even a court order wouldn't allow it."

Shortly, the squad Bart promised arrived. They didn't speak, though they sent requests mentally, occasionally. Don came in and tapped one on the arm in Muriel's office, and looked at him for a second. The squad member looked toward the break-room, and another squad member raised his hand in acknowledgment. Seconds later he was near the pop machines, looked back, and nodded. In the mean time, the squad member in Muriel's office located one stuck on the underside of the chair the 'judge' had been sitting in.

::There are three, here,:: he sent to Ted and Muriel. ::One under this chair, one at Mata's desk and one in the pop machine. None in the lunchroom. Two other squads are sweeping the entire Enclave, just to be sure. We're even doing your office, Ted, even though it was just constructed. They're omni-directional, so we can't trace them from here. Muriel, your fourth squad was sent, invisible, to CIA to see if they can tell if they're receiving the signals. In a few minutes I'd like you to have a conversation with someone about you're going someplace outside Enclave, tomorrow. If your squad can hear it come in, there, then we'll know.::

::How about a visit to my home? The one outside, not the one in here. I can use the excuse that I want to pick up my stuffed animals from my room,:: she sent.

::That would be perfect. Ground travel?:: the squad member asked.

::Yes. Full diplomatic blowout. Lead and chase cars, limo with Ambassador flags, the whole works. Let's give them a nice juicy target to go for.::

::And where will you be?:: asked Ted.

::In my apartment, curled up with a good pillow. You've been wearing me out, you sadistic man.:: This almost brought chuckles from both the squad member and Ted, but they

contained themselves.

::By the way, none of the bugs is visual. All audio, only,:: the squad member said.
::OK, they're in place. Can you say something?::

"Ted," Muriel said, "can I borrow the car, tomorrow? I want to go back home and pick up my stuffed animals. I'm lonesome without them."

"Sure, but you're not driving. I think you should take the limo. After all, you ARE an Ambassador. Lead and chase cars, too. Let's give the people in your neighborhood a thrill."

::Good! And it registers inside CIA. That's the target,:: said the squad member. ::Ted, your old office is clear. You can talk there, safely::

Ted gave Muriel the visual, and they both translated to his old office, now somewhat bare and empty of people.

"If you need something from the old house, ask your squads to get it," Ted said.

"Not necessary. Everything was translated to the new one except the lint and dust-bunnies," she grinned. "We need the President, again. But if I show up again they'll shoot me."

::It's covered. I've got a squad POLITELY bringing him. He'll be here in a few minutes,:: Bart sent.

"You know? There are benefits to having this link. And I'm beginning to see how you and Mata work. No wonder I can't keep up with you."

"Piffle," Muriel shot back. "Bart's been one jump ahead of you the whole time. You're just jealous because my squads love me like a sister." She grinned to show she was kidding.

The President showed up with two Secret Service officers, and was briefed on what they knew. Bart and Mata translated in to find out how the snatch would work. It was suggested that he have F.B.I. Agents in attendance to make the actual arrest, but that Envoy squads would apprehend the person and secure the evidence until they could get inside. The entire building would be put under shields, additional Envoys were being recruited for the purpose, to keep him from bolting.

"When do you intend to put this plan into action?" asked the President.

"Now," Muriel replied, curtly. "I have no intention of being a target for a kill squad from this person, nor to endanger my parent's home. You can join us, if you wish, or be returned to your office and find out the results later and second-hand. We can assure you of your protection, Mr. President."

"I think I'd just as soon see it through myself. The only change I'd make is to have the

Secret Service make the arrest. The officers with me can manage that, and we can authorize you to restrain him and take him to a place where more officers can take over.”

“Easily done, sir,” Muriel replied. “And our squads are formed up, outside, ready to go.”

As they walked out of Ted's old office, the President said, “You know? Sometime I'd like to actually see more of Enclave. Both times I've been here things have been a bit troublesome. May I ask, is the reason that your office is bugged the reason for meeting in this vacant office?”

“Yes, it used to be Ted's. He's since moved his office. We'd be happy to show them to you when this is cleared up and the bugs are removed,” Muriel said. “Now, sir, for your protection you'll be under shields and made invisible. You and your officers will be able to see each other and see out. But no one will be able to see you.”

“How effective are the shields?” asked one of the officers. Muriel figured that he was the equivalent of Mata's position: security chief.

“I'd say they'd do. The shields we will be using are the ones that Muriel developed. They stood up to her being shot with five .45 caliber guns in order to pass her test, a 9 millimeter round aimed at her head at the schoolyard, and an RPG aimed at the bus that her and her friends were in,” Ted casually replied.

“She developed?” the Secret Service officer looked at her in disbelief.

“Hmm? Oh, yes,” he tossed off. “When she was being trained she realized that the shields we used had a weakness. So she used the method but not the design. Hers have later proven much more effective than the old ones. They're the ones your President has been under from the time my people picked you all up.”

“And are they the ones that stopped the missiles?” the President asked.

“Of course,” said Ted. “Of course she wasn't holding them at the time. That was her friends from school. They'd just passed their shields test, and linked to create an inside-out bubble to stop them. The only reason that it took all twelve of them is that the engines were still running at the time they were stopped.”

“Kids stopped five missiles?” the incredulous officer asked.

“Oh yes. And very nicely, too. Techniques that they and Muriel used have become the standard for us all, now. In addition to training her friends to her level, she's also been instrumental in training Envoys to understand and be more like Humans. Shall we go?” And Ted gave the signal.

Chapter 20

Real Affirmative Action (Thursday afternoon)

The arrived at C.I.A. Headquarters, inside the ring of Envoys that were set to shut down the building. The Secret Service detail chief requested that it be they that made the actual arrest, which suited both Muriel and Ted. One of Ted's squads would go with the Ambassadors, President and Secret Service officers, so it was a minute finding out what space they'd be translating into and setting themselves up to fill it.

Then they were off, again, translating directly to the C.I.A. Chief's office. The shield went up around the building at the same time that they translated, cutting it off from the outside world completely. All utilities stopped, which had the benefit of crashing the computers and stopping all phone and radio communication. The ring of Envoys also became visible to indicate the limits of the shield and intimidate anyone looking out from inside the building.

The group invading the office was spread out around three sides of the office with Ted and Muriel to either side in front of them. The blank space between them was suddenly occupied by the President and two Secret Service officers. As one officer stepped forward, the C.I.A. Chief drew a gun.

"Just let go of it," Muriel said. The gun had stopped, unaimed and unfired. "Just let go before you get hurt." He resisted, trying to bring his arm up, then suddenly yelped and let go. Muriel moved the gun to the desk. The officer went forward to affect the arrest, but was stopped by Muriel.

"Let me see your hand. Come on," she said. "It won't heal properly under the current medical abilities of this country. I can help and take the pain away." Reluctantly, he held it out. Muriel looked, and cooled the burn caused by her heating up the gun's grip. Then went deeper and made sure that the tissues and muscles were returned to their original health. "There. Now, if you would, officer."

The officer took control of the man, placed him in handcuffs, and cited the reason for arresting him and read him his rights. She then walked him toward the door.

"It would be faster if we just translated out of here to where-ever you want to have him held." The detail chief grinned and suggested just taking him, and his computer, to the White House, and other officers could take charge from there. Ted translated them, followed by his detail squad, back to the rest of the security details, then gathered them all and translated to the President's normal entrance to his office.

The Envoys encircling the building released the shield and disappeared. And three hundred computers smoked from special charges inside that the desperate officers had tried

to set off when they realized that they were being invaded. Thousands of hours of work joined the smoke, and the fire alarms went off. So did the sprinklers, causing even more damage. Those computers that hadn't been destroyed by internal charges were shorted out as the power surge of the returned electrical service met the downpour of the sprinklers. There would be a lot expensive computers that would need to be replaced, and a lot of very wet people going home, tonight.

When they got back to the office the squad leader that had swept it was waiting for her. "What do you want to do with the bugs?" he asked.

"We'll send them back to the President as evidence of the C.I.A. attempting surveillance in violation of the treaty, and in direct contradiction of the edict that they not operate inside the territory of the United States. That, alone, should sink that jerk. It should also mean heavier oversight of the operation of the organization," she said. "Mata, can we create an officious sounding cover letter?" The laugh she got in return was all the answer she needed.

The squad leader led her to where each of the bugs was located, and she removed them without touching them. The squad leader grinned. The only trace that would be on the bugs would be that of whoever had set them. Mata 'found' appropriate packaging for them, in the offices of the local police department, and Muriel signed the letter – with only her first name – over the title Ambassador. It was on Enclave letterhead. It was then placed on the President's desk in plain sight. A continued observation showed that his security chief checked the letter, then handed it to him and signed the chain of evidence under Muriel's name. She also noted that he grinned when he did so. He'd read the letter and realized the joke.

Carl came into Muriel's office area and asked, "Can you hold off for, say, a half hour before calling it a day?"

"Sure," she said. "What's up?"

"I want to run Fred through the translation training and get him his next two stripes," Carl replied.

"Do you think he'll bolt?"

"Nope. He's been grinning ever since you and Ted went to grab that C.I.A. jerk. And I'm in him deep enough to know that he's not trying to hide anything. He's having the time of his life working here. And he's beginning to loosen up, more. You know, this new way of training is something else. I can see when he doesn't understand something, and help him correct it right away. No boggles. Of course, it helps that he's so submissive, though that's changing some as he gains confidence."

"Yea," said Muriel. "I think it's loose enough to work with just about anybody trainable. That's going to be our next hurdle. Knowing when they're trainable."

"I think that'll work itself out. If they can't manage a link, then they aren't trainable," Carl replied.

"OK," she said. "Do you need me to help train him?"

"I don't think so," Carl said. "We'll use Ted's old office as the target, and pop him in and out of it a few times, like you did with your friends. I know your routine, both from being in on you being trained and in your training your friends. And I know Fred and how he thinks. Between that and the fact that he HAS translated before, I don't think there will be any problems at all. Um, would you be upset if I asked for a transfer?"

"Whoa! Where'd that come from?" asked Muriel. "If you want to transfer, then of course you can. But can I ask why?"

"When you were training your friends you had Envoys assigned to them, and it helped train them."

"Yes, but the primary reason was for security," Muriel replied. "Do you think he needs security?"

"Yes, and no," he said. "Kinda a different situation. I think he needs a minder. He's not really in this world the way you and I are. I don't know how it happened, but he thinks differently. He has a tendency to narrow his focus so tight that he's not aware of what's going on around him. Pull him out of it, and he functions like any other Envoy. But, like now with his section, he isn't aware of anything but what they're working on."

"So, you think being a minder would be pretty much a permanent situation."

"Yea, I'm afraid so. He's a nice guy, basically. Just got involved in bad company and was too mono-focused to really realize what they were doing. It's why I don't think he will bolt. But, at the same time, the very way he thinks in patterns and connections, leads me to believe that the amount of time to finish his training will mostly be in the practice."

"OK," Muriel said, "If he's happy with you then I see no reason why you shouldn't be assigned to him. I'll tell Mata, so we can fill your slot. And realize that I'm still here, still a friend, and expect you to say 'hi' once in a while." Carl left to talk to his new charge. Muriel had no doubt, considering what Carl had said about Fred, that he'd be his minder.

::Mata, we're going to need someone to fill Carl's slot. He's being transferred."

::WHAT! What happened?::

::Nothing serious. Carl feels that Fred needs someone to anchor him in the real world, and suggested that he needed a minder. He's offered to fill that position. I think he's right, and I think Fred will go along with it. How bad will it be to fill his slot?::

::Gad, girl, you scared me. Yes, I agree with Carl. And filling the slot won't be too bad.

He was squad leader, and I'll bump someone in the squad up, and put someone new in as a regular member. It isn't like we don't have about fifty thousand volunteers for the position. For some reason everybody wants to work for you.:: Muriel could feel Mata's grin when she sent that. ::By the way, I think part of the reason Carl wants to be his minder is that he's trying to be a bridge between the way Fred thinks and the way Envoys or Humans think. In fact, I think he's about halfway there. I've seen him make connections between things, himself. It isn't so much a way of thinking as a level of awareness. You do it, too, you know. Subconsciously, but it's there, just not as intense. Ted doesn't. Or at least not yet.::

::Gotta go,:: Muriel sent. "Mom! Dad! Hi! What can I do for you? Come, sit," Muriel directed them to the casual area and joined them on the couch. "Can we get you something to drink?"

"No, nothing like that. We hadn't heard from you for a while, and were worried," her mother said.

"I know. I'm sorry. Things have been hectic, but they should settle down, now. And by the time I got to my apartment I didn't want to disturb you in case you were already asleep. We had a couple of boggles that needed to be cleaned up."

"I notice that Ted now has an office next to you," her mother said in a leading sort of way.

"Yea. He liked what I did with mine so much that he decided to have one like it. And he thought it would be better if they were next to each other. Kind of a solidarity thing. Separate but equal. They really are separate, too. OH! No, mother, nothing is going on. It's purely business. He did design it along the lines of mine, but backwards and with his own touches. It does make an impression, though, when there are two Ambassador's offices next to each other, both stocked with hot and cold running security details."

Her mother visibly relaxed, so Muriel went on, "How are you two doing?"

"This place is great. I'm not sure I want to go back to the way things were. They've got concerts here, and artwork. SUCH artwork, beautiful stuff. Clothing designs that Paris and Italy would kill for, Food that you would think was fattening, but isn't. And Fran and her troops to take care of anything that we need as well as kid with us. Um"

"I know. It's not the same as having me there, underfoot, causing trouble and needing to be corrected all the time," Muriel kidded.

"No, it's not. And we miss you, you know. But"

"It's hard," her father chimed in. "It's hard letting go of a child when she's ready to fly. But we know it's part of life. And it's given us, your mother and I, a chance to get reacquainted. And, in a way, it's given us a chance to see the real you. The you that was always there and wasn't allowed to show, and the you you've become when you had the chance. I was so wrong, before. I wanted to put the jinn back in the bottle, but it doesn't work

that way. You couldn't have gone back to the way you were. No, I'm not blaming you. In fact, I wish there'd been a way that you could have blossomed earlier. Sometimes I feel that we held you back."

"Nonsense," said Muriel. "I couldn't have accepted it before now. I wasn't ready. And, I think, later and I'd have been so beaten down and jaded by the bullies that I wouldn't have been able to. It was luck. Two ways. Ted hadn't thought to train children. He was looking for adults, and most adults aren't flexible enough to learn. They're too bound up in their lives. Kids, on the other hand, ARE change. Now, that's not to say that NO adults can be trained, but it might take more work to help them overcome their thinking that 'oh, well, nobody can do that'."

"You really believe that way?" her father asked.

"You bet. If you don't believe me, then ask Fran. She knows as much as any of my squads do. Envoys share information. And I've got at least one member of my squad that's trained someone, himself." Here, little fishy, she thought to herself.

"Well, we've taken enough of your time and should be going. We've got a couple of things we'd like to do, ourselves." He got up and helped her mother up. They walked toward the door. And disappeared.

"SON-OF-A"

"Muriel, don't say it," said Mata from her desk.

::Young lady,:: Muriel heard the unmistakable but obviously mental voice of her mother, ::I thought we taught you better than that. Mind your language.:: A mental chuckle followed, that showed that her mother was pleased to have surprised her. ::It took Fran and her team 4 days. But we learned.::

Muriel roared with laughter. Mata came in and, when Muriel quieted down some, said, "Parents hate to think that their kids are smarter than they are." Which set Muriel off, again.

"What's going on, here," Ted said, storming in.

Mata told him. Muriel was wiping her eyes and trying to get the chuckles down to where she could talk. "Her parents can translate. They also had shields, I noticed. And obviously they could send mentally. Muriel just had another 'stopper'. And yes, they did it. Fran didn't. I was following them mentally when they set up for it. Now I know where she got it from. Her parents are the same way."

"Well! I'll be . . . ,", said Ted. "Well . . . wow."

"I should have noticed," Muriel finally managed to get out. "The dress mom was wearing wasn't anything that she'd had before, and wasn't anything that I remember in the shops. I think she made it. And dad's suit was definitely new. Those stinkers. They held out

on me. Made me think that other things were going on, and that they were too old and feeble to do much.”

Muriel saw Carl and Fred standing just outside her office area. “Come in,” Muriel said.

::Yes. Both:: sent Carl. He didn't need to say anything else.

Muriel looked at Fred and held her arms up. Fred visibly brightened and held his up to match, and two more stripes decorated his sleeves, collar and seams. He just looked at them in wonder.

“Muriel, would you mind if Carl stayed with me?” Fred asked

“Not at all. If it makes you comfortable, then by all means,” she replied. She didn't bother telling him that Carl had already talked to her about it. She knew. Fred needed to ask, himself. And the smile on Fred's face was all the answer she needed.

As they left, Ted said, “Well, that's something. So he's happy here.”

“Yea, Carl came to me earlier and warned me,” Muriel said. “He's transferred to Fred as his minder. I think he's learning how Fred thinks, too. And Fred's happy. He's doing what he likes to do, but being treated better and with respect. I haven't heard any complaints from his section, either. But I really haven't had much chance to check.”

“Not your job,” Mata put in. “And I have checked. Three of them just like doing the job, and like the way Fred works. Two of them may go on to start other analysis sections of their own, in time. They're bubbling. They never realized how much fun it could be, and are trying to do the same things that Fred is doing with patterns and connections.”

“Ted,” Muriel said, “I think my parents want to stay.”

“Well! Good! I was a bit worried about them. And with their new-found abilities I'd be more so. So, how'd they pull it off?”

“They came in, saying they were worried about me, because they hadn't seen me the past couple of days, or something. Then worried that you putting your office next to mine meant that there was something going on between us. I assured them that it was simply business – showing solidarity, separate but equal. They bought it. Then they indicated that they should be leaving, they had things to do, walked toward the door and disappeared. I said, 'son-of-a . . . ' and mom mentally chided me for it, but she was kidding. I could tell by the tone of her mental voice. I think she was laughing at me. Putting me in my place.”

“I think,” she added, “that they were telling me that I didn't need to come home. Dad even apologized for the way he'd behaved, saying that it was hard to let one's child go. I think they turned me loose!”

“Yes,” Ted said, slowly. “In a way they did. But not a 'forever' thing. You'll always be

welcome back. Dinner, overnights, whatever. But they're treating you as an adult."

"But I'm only twelve!"

"Yes, but you've grown up a lot in the past week. You've done things that most adult humans haven't. You've got confidence, maturity of thought and action, and responsibility. Yes, you've changed, and that was hard on them at first, until they could see how it turned out. And they're certainly welcome here, and don't need to worry about money anymore. I wonder if they made the trip Home," he said.

"No," Mata said. "I asked Fran. They said that they'd get there soon enough. That getting around earth was enough for them. They are balanced, she said. But they don't want uniforms, and they don't feel the need for stripes, or all the hoopla. I think that was the word. They are happy just being alive and healthy, and having new 'toys' to play with."

"So, Fran trained them?" asked Ted.

"Yep," replied Mata. "she and her squad. The link was the hardest. Once that came, the rest just started to fall into place. Partly because Fran used the extended link that leaks over. That made it MUCH easier. I know, she kinda jumped the gun on it. But she saw the need, and she was right. Oh, and the Whites also made the link to each other. Deep. It appears to be working all right for them, though."

"Yes, it would," Muriel said. "They were always 'in tune' with each other. Always thought alike, with very little differences. So, of course they'd want to take it deeper. They've always been very much in love."

"Well," said Ted. "changing the subject, you and your friends have tests coming up, Monday. You and they have already been tutored beyond what the tests will cover. And you've shown that, at least for you, the material has shaken down pretty good. The way you handled Mr. Palmer, talking about litigation and copyrights was proof of that. It just seemed to be there when you needed it, didn't it."

"Yea, like I'd always known about it. And it made sense to me," replied Muriel.

"That's the way it should be. But we should be sure that it took like that with your friends. We want them to feel confident."

Chapter 21

Surprise (Friday morning)

Morning just didn't go the way Muriel had thought it would go. It had been all planned out. They'd get the kids aside and ask them questions. The tutors supplied some for them – some real zingers along with more common questions. They'd go through them with the kids, individually, and see how they did. Then the plan fell apart.

“What? Again?” asked Carla.

“We already did this about twenty times,” said Bobby.

“Um . . . ,” said one of their Envoys. “Um, we weren't aware that we shouldn't.”

“Wait,” said Muriel. “You mean you've been testing the kids on what they know?”

“Yea. We wanted them to be comfortable with it, and see how well it took. It was a bit of a game, and we needed a way to keep them occupied.”

“Well! NOW what am I going to do for the morning. Sit and twiddle my thumbs?” asked Muriel in a shocked, 'adult' voice and her fists on her hips. The kids laughed. “No, you did fine. And if the kids are comfortable with it, then I don't see any need to repeat it. I'm sorry, kids,” she said. “I know this has been a bit rough on you, and I haven't spent as much time as I should with you.”

“Oh, stuff it, Muriel,” said Don. “You were busy. And needed. And we got along. We learned from our Envoys, and from the squads. And a couple of times we got to go along and help. Things were happening fast. We knew that. And we knew that the best thing we could do, most times, was to stay out of the way. So we did.”

“Yea, but I left you alone”

“Muriel, you did what you had to do. We've all had chores at home that kept us from being together at times. This was better. We had our Envoys, and went all over Enclave, seeing things and having fun,” Don said. “The Envoys taught us about Home, and sometimes we went there and saw how it was set up. Saw Lotta, and talked with her. Learned how to make different things. Pushed our new training a bit to see what we could do with it. We had fun.”

“We've got to find things for you to do,” Muriel said.

“We figured that was coming,” said Bobby. “That's why we've been trying to push what we can do a bit. To see what we were good at. What could be made useful, to help you.”

"We're still trying," chimed in Carla. "We've got some ideas, but we're still working on them. Some of us haven't really figured out what they like, yet. The Envoys are helping. So are the squads, when they're here. We're thinking of all sorts of jobs. Nothing's really taken, yet. But we'll keep looking."

"Wow. You guys are terrific. OK, then if you're happy, I'm happy. And I'll get with you as I can. OK?" asked Muriel.

The group all agreed, with grins. So Muriel went back to her office, 'to see what kind of trouble she could get into'.

It arrived without her help. A woman in a gray suit, one very familiar to Muriel from recent events, came through the door and went to Mata's desk. After a short discussion, she was ushered into Muriel's office.

"Ms. Muriel, I'm Melanie Carter of the Secret Service."

"It's just Muriel, Ms. Carter. Won't you have a seat?" Muriel asked.

"I should probably tell you that I am armed. I didn't see any security check-points. I thought you should know."

"Oh, you mean the 9 millimeter in a shoulder holster and the mini you've got on your right ankle? You've been through at least three check-points, as you call them, by the time you sat down. The Envoy from Reception that brought you here, Mata, my Security Chief, and me. Don't worry about it," Muriel said. "As for why we seem so casual about it, let me show you something." Muriel brought up the raw footage of her test, and warned the rest of the room that there'd be a loud noise. The recording played, and Ms. Carter jumped when she saw the squad fire on Muriel. Then watched, amazed, as Muriel picked the slugs out of what appeared to be thin air.

"That was my test for how well I could make a shield. And I'm usually shielded all the time, now. Plus, if I don't miss my guess, Mata's got one on me, and probably half the people in the room do."

"All of them," Mata said, from her desk. "We don't take chances with the boss."

"Oh," said Ms. Carter. "Look, I'm not really here, officially. Can anyone learn to do that? Oh, and call me Melanie."

"OK, Melanie. Anyone that can make a mental link can learn the techniques."

"Well, I guess that lets me out, then."

"How do you know? Have you ever tried? Look. Just relax. Let's try something. Close your eyes. That's it. Now, I want you to reach out. Not with your hand. Pretend your

mind has an arm. Reach out with that. In front of you is a door. Knock on the door.”

And a moment later the most amazed look came over Melanie's face. “That was you?”

::Yes,:: Muriel responded. ::You can hear me. And you can talk in your head, and just push it to me and I'll hear you.::

::That's it? It's that easy?::

::The hard part is having someone you can do it with, the first few times. After that, well there are other techniques that build on this. But that's basically it,:: Muriel added.

“But for the time being, we should probably stick to talking. It'll be easier on you. I pushed, when I first learned. That, and other things. And I ended up with a headache that Mata had to ease for me. If you end up with one, please let me know. I can sooth it without you taking drugs or anything. I take it you want to learn?”

“Yes. I saw what you people did. I couldn't believe it. Then I had to, when one minute I'm in the President's office, and the next I'm across the country.”

“OK,” said Muriel. “It's going to take some time to teach you. Can you take some time off?”

“I'm on two week leave, starting today. If I need more, I can ask for an extension or a leave of absence.”

“How about pets, or appointments, or people that would miss you.”

“No pets. I'm not there enough to take care of them. No appointments. And nobody would miss me right now.”

“OK, I'm going to ask you to do something. It's the reason we start with a mental link. I'm going to show you what you look like to Envoys. Just close your eyes. There, what do you see.”

“I see me,” said Melanie. “I see me, but with a kind of gray glow in the middle that radiates outside my body.”

“What you're looking at is your soul. A human soul is normally gray. That's because we all make mistakes, We all do things that, maybe, we shouldn't, that we feel guilty about. We all make bad decisions in life. It's part of us. Nothing to be alarmed about. Certainly nothing that I'm going to judge you for. Now, I want you to open your eyes and look at Mata. If you let me, I can show you the little twist that will let you see souls on your own. OK? Good. Here's how you do it.”

“Wow! Hers is white!”

"Yep," said Muriel. "It used to be that all Envoy souls were white. And it looks brighter because Envoys are soul. They have no real physical body. It took me a bit to understand that, because they feel solid."

Melanie turned back to Muriel. "You're gray! And not as bright. But kind of sparkley."

"That's because I'm human. I'm just a twelve year old girl that learned how to do things."

"But, you're an Ambassador!"

"Yep. One of two. The other one is human, too. Or was. Long story, and I'll let him tell it to you, if you want. You've already had part of the training. Do you want to continue?"

"You mean I can? YES! Of course I do," Melanie said.

::Mata, we're going to need guest quarters for her::

::Already arranged. The Guest House opposite Reception. It's under her name and open ended. I wasn't sure how long she'd need it::

::Thanks, ever faithful and helpful Mata:: A mental snort was all the answer she got.

"OK," Muriel said, "for this next bit I'm going to ask you to stand up. I want you to visualize a hole, straight down, under your feet. At the end of the tunnel is a light. See it in your mind? Good. Reach for it with your mind, and draw it up toward you. That's your power. Feel it? Kinda a warm, filling feeling. Relaxing. Easing your headache, too, isn't it."

"Wow. Is this real?"

"Look through my eyes. What do you see?"

"I sparkle!" Melanie said.

"Yep. It's real. Now that you're attached, it won't go away. So, now let's put it to work."

"Wait a minute. You mean I'll always have it, now? I don't have to keep thinking about it, or reach for it when I do something mental?" asked Melanie.

"Nope. Even sleeping. Even knockout, unconscious. Once you draw it in, it has a path to follow. It doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing. Oh, you can draw more, if you need it, but for all intents and purposes, it's there and it isn't going away. You see, what you hooked into isn't really under your feet. It's just a way of imagining it. It's not something in the earth. It's the whole universe. And you just told it you're here and want to be fed. So it's feeding you. Envoys are permanently connected to it. It's the way they are. But you'll find out more about them, later. So, ready for the next step?"

"I guess so. What's next?"

"Shielding," said Muriel. "With all that power available, you could be a target. But you need the power to support the shield. And any others you create. So, now that you have the power, we'll get you protected. And we'll give you proof that you are."

"Are you going to shoot me?"

"No, nothing that dramatic. And noisy. We discovered it wasn't necessary. So, follow my mind, and you'll see how they're done." Muriel constructed a shield around her, and anchored it to the ground. Then dissolved it. "So, did you see what I did?"

"Yes, I think so. You created a tube around me and capped it at one end, and buried the other in the ground and capped it, then made a thick, sticky coating on the outside. It didn't look like much. That's all there is to it?"

"Hold on a minute." ::All right, you lot. Let me get down to my own shield. You KNOW it will hold:: "OK, ready to try it?"

"I hope so. What happens if I fail?" asked Melanie.

"We try again, maybe in different ways, until you get it."

"You seem so sure that I'll succeed!"

"My parents managed to learn it. And no, I didn't train them. They've got a security squad, and the squad leader taught them. And, if necessary, I'll ask some of my detail to help. No sweat. We don't believe in failure, here."

"OK, here goes." Melanie had the idea of what a shield was, and how it was shaped. She started there, building the tube, capping it above her, burying it beneath her and capping it, and trying to make it solid. Then she tried to add the 'sticky' on the outside. She felt like she was juggling eggs, and the whole thing collapsed.

"Good. Good try. Let's take it a step at a time. You built the tube and capped the ends and anchored it, good. Do that over and over until it's one move. It's like drawing and firing. You don't think about it, you just do it. That's because you practiced it slowly until you had the steps down pat. Now, instead of steps, it's all one move. Same with the shield. Go ahead."

After a few tries, Melanie got so she could snap the shield up or down as she wished. Then Muriel had her add the 'sticky', the same way, until the whole thing was one move, as instant as a reflex.

"OK, Melanie. I usually leave mine up all the time. In fact, it's kinda a signature with me that nothing gets closer than one foot to me. So, I want you to build the shield, then forget about it. It's already attached to your power, because it's attached to you. You don't have to keep concentrating on it. Oh, and you can release the 'sticky' locally, to allow you to take

things out of it. Or let someone else take things out of it. You don't have to think how, any more than you have to think how to be able to pick things up. And yes, I can see the question, you can shoot through it if you need to. The shield is to protect you, not limit you. It does what you want."

"Um . . . what if I want to . . . I mean"

Mata came into the office. "Yes, Melanie. You can be close to a man, by drawing your shields back and allowing him to be close to you. That makes it your choice. With shields, no man can try to dominate you by force and do things to you against your will. Muriel's only twelve, and can't be expected to know such things. But, despite looking like a twelve year old myself, I'm MUCH older, and have seen many nasty things. Trust me, when Muriel talks of you protecting yourself, she means it." Mata stepped back, and let Muriel take over again.

Muriel had Melanie set and dissolve her shield a few more times, then told her to set it, one last time. Just as it was set, a blur of motion caught Melanie's eye, and a baseball bat stopped, stuck, about a foot from her abdomen.

"Yep. Good to go," said the impish figure to Muriel. "Another successful shield training."

"Thanks, Don," laughed Muriel.

Melanie let Don take his bat back, and the imp promptly slid it . . . nowhere? Melanie looked at Muriel. "How'd he do that?"

"Oh, he just created a pocket where no pocket should be. Then he put the bat in the 'no pocket'."

"Like that's an explanation. HOW?"

"We'll get into that when we teach you how to be the height of fashion without it costing you a cent," said Muriel. "But that's for after lunch, and when we've found you a place to stay."

"Um . . . I should have asked. How much is the training and room, and stuff?"

"Look, I'm a twelve year old kid. I was doing badly in school. My parents are retired and on a fixed income and don't have any spare money. I was trained, given an office and apartment and four squads of half-crazy Envoys, headed by a Security Chief that looks like a twelve year old girl, but was actually a VERY old man that looked middle aged. How much did it cost? Nothing. You're paying by learning. And you'll pay for it the rest of your life by doing unthinkable things, doing the nasty jobs that others won't take, protecting people with your life but YOU know that you're not really risking anything. I know. I've been shot at, had an RPG fired at me and withstood a crazy ride in a bus with it hanging one foot from the bus. And other things that I really don't want to talk about, but I'm not ashamed of. And all in a week. We don't charge for training people that can accept it. And the room and food are free.

We'll even assign an Envoy to stay with you, if you feel the need."

"You're kidding! But this stuff is priceless!"

"You're right," said Muriel. "Priceless. Without price. Therefore free. We give it away and make the world a bit better in the process."

"But what if it got in the wrong hands?"

"What's the first part of the training?" Muriel asked.

"Linking, mentally . . . oh. Someone who was up to no good would be found out right away if they linked. So they wouldn't do it. Maybe couldn't do it, because they'd be so protective of what was in their head that they couldn't create the link."

"Believe me, I puzzled over that one for a LOT longer than you did. You become your own judge with this training. If you go all the way through, you'll even prove it to yourself."

"How?"

"The last phase of the training is to learn how to get to the nation called Home. It isn't really a nation, like people think of it. But when you get there and realize where you are, well, you kinda realize that you are the only judge there is. There's twelve kids out there raising cane that have been there. And they've done some phenomenal things, themselves. Like stopping missiles when they'd just learned how to shield. Stopping them and holding them against the force of their engines. And they're kids. They didn't think about it, they just did it. Earned a stripe on their sleeves doing it, too."

"Am I going to need a uniform? Where do I get it?"

"The uniform isn't mandatory. For those of us that are attached to the Envoys and Enclave it sets us off from the Envoys, themselves. They don't wear stripes, unless they go through the same training and learn these methods and want to wear it. Two did. As for where you get it, you make it. That's this afternoon. Let's have lunch."

She took Melanie's arm and translated them to her apartment.

"You're late!" was the first thing Melanie heard.

"Oh, no, you've got the duty again. We'll all be poisoned in our sleep!"

"Siddown and shadup, silly little brat," growled the male voice. "You'd think you run this place."

"Wait a minute. I DO!" said Muriel. "Chuck, how'd you get the duty?"

"I lost the bet. I didn't think you'd be able to train a cop. I was wrong. No worries, the

food's edible. It's even good. Melanie, what would you like to drink? Non-alcoholic, that is. Muriel is underage, and you DON'T want to train after even one drink. Once you're trained it won't matter."

Melanie just looked back and forth between Muriel and this character that she realized was an Envoy.

"Oh, Melanie, this is Chuck. One of my security detail, and yes, he's an Envoy. As for the banter, don't be alarmed. We all tease back and forth. Chuck did the plumbing on my office and apartment. And, when he acts up, we call him Up-Chuck."

"Oh, now you did it," said Chuck. "I'll never live that down, now. Even the Secret Service knows my secret." Melanie chuckled.

"Remember, I'm a kid," said Muriel. "And what do kids do? They kid."

"That was a bad pun the FIRST time I heard it," said a loud male voice out of the air. "Can I come over?"

"Sure. C'mon."

And Ted stepped into the room. Melanie's jaw dropped. "Is there enough for me, too, Chuck?"

"Sure, no problem."

"So, Melanie, how bad is this terror abusing you?" asked Ted.

"Huh? Oh, not at all. I mean, yea I feel like I ran through the mill, but, really, she's quite good at finding ways to teach me."

"Well, if you can't get satisfaction from her, come on over to my side. I'm sure we've got Envoys that can probably teach you, too."

Muriel just coughed to cover the laugh. "Don't listen to him. He's a masher, just out to get a pretty face. Actually he NEEDS a pretty face. His is so plain."

"Good grief! You even kid with the head of a nation?"

"Yea, and she taught me her bad habits, too," said Ted. "But I must say that things have been livelier with her around. I wanted someone who could be a bridge between Envoys and Humans. I got someone that was that as well as a trainer. And the way she kept wheeling her way around problems, well, I got a bridge with training wheels."

Nobody laughed. "Rrrr," Ted muttered. Muriel sputtered into laughter and Chuck just chuckled.

“Too much build-up, Ted. You'll learn.”

“With you as a teacher, do I have a choice.?”

“Well, yes. You could always fire me,” Muriel said.

“Yea, right. And you leave, and ALL the Envoys leave and set up shop someplace else, leaving me to my own cooking. Have you ever tasted my cooking?”

“Don't do it, Muriel,” said Chuck. “You wouldn't die. You'd only wish you could.”

Suddenly, Melanie started laughing. The rest waited until she calmed down and explained, “I understand, now. It's how you reduce tensions. How you show the world that it is absurd by making absurd jokes.”

“Yea, something like that,” said Muriel.

“It's a kid thing. Kids kid,” said Melanie. “I'd forgotten what it was like to be twelve.” And she started laughing again.

When she finally stopped, Ted said, “Better now?”

“Yea,” said Melanie. “Lots. Thanks. Just, which one of you two set it up?”

“Why couldn't it have been Muriel that set it up?” asked Chuck.

“Because she was busy trying to teach me to shield. And concentrating on that. And setting up Don to attack me, which is also a kid thing. So she hollered for help. So which one of you did it?”

“Actually, Ted did,” said Chuck.

“Actually, Chuck did,” said Ted.

They looked at each other. “OK,” said Ted, “we set it up together. She knew you were tense, trying too hard. That you needed something to break it, but didn't know what. So, we jumped in and decided whiplash would be the thing to try. It worked. I think you can go on with your training, now, without worrying about it. You know it works, but you've been worrying about the wrong things.”

“We train. We don't judge. People judge themselves with their lives. Black souls have already declared themselves. Gray can go either way, but they give themselves away, one way or another. Envoys are white, at least to start. But can go black. We've dealt with a few. A nasty job. And Muriel has had to help with some. No, I didn't make her. It was her choice. But it needed to be done for the safety of a lot of people. Yet she could train twelve really strange kids at once, and in two days. Train them by getting them to train themselves. To find their own ways of doing things.”

“We don't hand out stripes for that. We didn't know that it was even possible. Then Muriel came into our lives, almost by accident, and turned everything upside down. Now, we're all crazy, here.”

Chapter 22

Dressing to Kill (Friday afternoon)

After lunch, Muriel translated Melanie directly to the end of the counter at the 'Guest House'. Spacious windows at the front of the building allowed her to show Melanie that Reception was directly across the street. This gave Melanie some comfort. If she couldn't remember how to get to Muriel's office, she could always ask them to guide her.

Upstairs, Melanie's room, though not as large as Muriel's apartment, was well laid out.

"There's even hot and cold running Envoys to take care of anything you need," said Muriel. "This goes beyond being a luxury suite. Two reasons. First, the Envoys that work here are literally happy to find ways to help people. Something you only get sparingly in a luxury suite. Second, Guests aren't charged a thing. I thought Ted was crazy when I first heard about it. Then I found out the economics of Home, and realized why he does it. The only things that cost money are things that visitors buy, and that's not expensive. They're only charged something because they expect it. Oh, and outside services cost. There are roads that Envoys build – four lane highways, for example, cost something like one hundred dollars a mile. And years down the road the government that requested them will find out that they don't need maintenance. Not even the renewal of lines for lane marking."

"Now," Muriel said, "the reason for being here is to give us some privacy for the next stage in your training. I'm going to show you how I get dressed."

"Um, I think I learned that when I was five," said Melanie.

"Uh, huh. So did I. Then I came here and found out there was an easier way. Like this." And Muriel promptly changed to the white blouse and yellow flowered jumper she'd worn at school that day.

"Oh, wow. How'd you do that?"

"Simple, I don't buy clothes anymore. I make them," said Muriel. "I visualize what I want to wear, and switch."

"But where did the uniform go?"

"Ah. That's why the privacy. The clothes you have on right now you didn't make. So you don't know them as well as clothes you create yourself. So, to keep from throwing them away we'll put them in a suitcase. It may be, after you've learned this, that you won't need them again. But it's better to be safe. Same with the guns. They're smaller, and it's possible to store them in 'no pockets'. But for right now, everything needs to come off. Oh, not immediately, but when you start actually making your clothes."

"I'm also going to ask someone to come here – no not Ted. Not Chuck, either – to show you what a plain uniform looks like. No, we don't expect you to wear a uniform all the time. But it's a starting point that I and the Envoys know well. We can move from there to suits, designer clothes, stuff like that. When I learned, it turned into a giggle party. When my friends learned we split them up in my apartment between boys and girls. Some of the things the girls came up with would have given the boys a heart attack. The person I'm going to ask to come here is an adult female Envoy. Hold on."

::Nancy, are you doing anything that can't wait?:

"No, why, Muriel?"

"OK, that was quick. Model and maybe tutor. Melanie needs to learn to make clothes, and I thought the place to start would be a uniform," Muriel said.

Nancy looked at Melanie, seemingly casually, and said to Muriel, "Is she going to be wearing a uniform, or is she staying with her job as a Secret Service officer?"

"Secret Service officer," Melanie responded.

"Then you don't want to start with a uniform. Unless she wants a memento of her visit and a reminder of the stripes she's earned. Even that we can improve on." Nancy proceeded to look Melanie over, asking her to open her coat, seeing how the holsters for her guns were worn. "Oh, THAT'S got to go," was her response to that. Then checking the material. "That can be improved on, too. OK, wait a minute." Nancy thought for a moment, then changed into what looked like a duplicate of Melanie's suit, complete with guns.

"This look about right? It doesn't have to be perfect the first time. You'll improve on it once you're wearing it. Fit, style, the things that make it something a woman can wear comfortably instead of something for a man," Nancy said.

"Geez! Except for the face, it's like looking in a mirror!"

"OK, now I'm going to take the gun substitutes out of the picture. How about now?"

"Yea, I can see it," said Melanie.

"Good. Then we can start." Nancy looked at the bed and a plain, flat black leather suitcase appeared and opened up. "Just put your clothes in there. Leave the guns and holsters, oh, and badge and identification, on the bed. And yes, you can skin right down to nothing. There's nothing saying that what you wear under your suit has to conform to some man's idea of what you should wear. This isn't like the military."

Melanie looked at Muriel. "This is the other reason why I asked Nancy to help. I can leave, if it makes you uncomfortable for me to be here. It's also why I said that the 'other person' wouldn't be Ted." Melanie blushed.

"No, you can stay. I just – you really meant it when you said I'd be creating my clothes!"

"Of course. You saw me do it," Muriel switched back to her uniform. "You saw Nancy do it on the spot, just from studying you a bit. You can do the same thing. Oh, and she's right. Starting with something that you know is easier."

"There's this dress I always wanted . . . ," Melanie removed her clothes and armament, then waited for further instructions.

"OK," said Nancy, "I want you to think about wearing your suit. Think hard, then look in the mirror and ONLY see yourself wearing it."

Melanie did. Closing her eyes in concentration for a moment, Feeling what it felt like to wear it, what it looked like in a mirror. Then turned and opened her eyes. She was wearing it. Or at least a close approximation to it.

"Oh"

"Yep. The more you do it, the less you'll have to concentrate. So things that you would normally wear you can flip into instantaneously. Cool, isn't it?" asked Muriel.

"Anything you'd like to improve?" asked Nancy. "You used to be military. What branch?"

"Marine. Grunt for two years, then moved into Law Enforcement. Four years of that."

"Remember the uniform?" asked Nancy.

"Oh, yea. TOO well."

"Switch."

Suddenly, Melanie was wearing BDUs, gun on her hip, boots, the works. "You know," she said, softly, "I hated this rag the whole time I wore it. It never seemed to fit, the boots hurt my feet by the end of the day. The gun . . . oh, gad, the gun . . . a .45 that always felt like it was pulling me over. It was easier to draw, but BOY was it heavy."

"What about the boots. Not at the end of the day, but while you were in action?" Nancy asked.

"Solid. Supportive. Not like what I have to wear, now."

"OK, What about support and comfort. Underclothes."

"Oh, my. What I had in the military was fit for a man, not a woman. Even now, I can't

seem to get anything that will give me the support and comfort I want.”

“Back to your suit. Quick!”

Melanie changed. “Now, we make changes,” said Nancy. “Changes to make it more comfortable. Changes to give you support where you need it. Changes to your shoes so they won’t pinch, and will give you traction. Then we’ll work on the guns. You’ll never be without one again.”

And so it went. First, with what she normally wore to work, making them look 'normal' but so augmented and adjusted that they actually fit right and allowed her free movement while providing her the support she needed. Then getting her to realize that, even if her gun were taken away from her, she could always pull it out of a 'no pocket' just by willing it to be there in her hand. So she could draw it from her hip instead of cross-draw from under her arm. Shoes. Shoes that felt solid and had a tread for traction, but looked like what the men wanted her to wear. Suit was still in the plain gray, but the material was soft to her, while looking sharp in the mirror. Crisp. New.

“How do I clean it?” asked Melanie.

“Oh, now that’s the trick. You don’t. It won’t get dirty. Besides your shield protecting you from rain, dirt, spills, and such, the material itself just won’t take dirt or stains,” Muriel said. With Nancy having taken over the training, Muriel felt that she should add SOMETHING. Nancy chuckled in her mind.

“Now,” said Nancy, “about the stripes. You see Muriel’s. Each one indicates a certain level of achievement. They aren’t mandatory. But sometimes Humans like to remember that they DID make those achievements. Doctor’s offices, all those framed certificates. People in sports with all their medals, awards, and such. Even the military with its medals. So, we can give you the stripes to show that you made it. That it’s solid and real. But we can also do it in a way that YOU can see them, but nobody else can. Unless they’re an Envoy or Envoy trained, that is. Muriel would be able to see them, for instance. So if you’d like to have them, we can find a way.”

“You mean, I could have them on my suit, and others wouldn’t know about it?”

“Yep. Exactly. Plain to you, but no one else needs to know. Unless you want to show them to someone.”

Melanie looked at her sleeves. Then looked at Muriel’s. Then looked at Nancy.

“Uh, huh. You passed shielding, which is a landmark. But you didn’t have a place to put a stripe. That’s why teaching you to make your own clothes. Look at your sleeves.”

Melanie did. And suddenly there was a thin, silver stripe around the cuff. “Oh, my,” she said, and sat down. “They are NOT going to believe this in Washington. And they can’t see them, unless I want them to?”

“That's right. They're like an illusion that you can turn on and off. Muriel's aren't. And yes, Muriel, I felt you following how I did it, so you can do the next one.”

::Ted? Does performance before the training count? Or does it only count that a person protect Envoys or the Enclave?::

::She was a Marine, and in Law Enforcement, and she's a Secret Service officer, now. I'd say that counts, considering all she's been through.::

“The second stripe is for protecting those that can't protect themselves. Law Enforcement counts.” and Muriel applied the second stripe, checked by Nancy.

Melanie just stared at her cuffs.

“When you get through admiring yourself, let me know. There's more to learn,” said Muriel, dryly but so obviously that Melanie knew she was kidding.

Melanie took a moment longer, then pulled herself together. “OK, what's next?”

“Well, now that the private part of the training is over, how about we go back to my office. You remember what it looks like? Think of looking at the door from the outside. Now reach out and see it with your mind. Don't try to create the image, just let it correct the image in your mind. Anybody standing in the way? Anyone walking near that might be in the way? No? Then step into the image.”

Three people left the room and stood outside Muriel's office. One of them had to be supported because she'd become faint. Nancy grabbed her and translated to a vacant recliner in the break-room. Muriel followed, and checked Melanie over, then boosted her blood sugar and blood pressure a bit.

When Melanie came back in focus, she apologized. “I just suddenly realized, when I got here, that you weren't showing me how to do it, but having me do it myself. That I had done it. I'd moved myself from my room to your office. And it's easy.”

“Yes, it is,” said Muriel. “Much easier than learning to make clothes. Technically, you don't have to step into it. In fact, the second time I did it I was facing four squads and walked backwards.”

Nancy was grinning. “Much easier if you don't over-think things. Just do it. When you're ready, we'll have you practice a bit more. Then you can call up the airline and cancel your flight back, and save yourself some money.”

“Oh, this is NOT going to be believed in Washington. Not at all. Until sometime I actually do it in front of them. Is there a limit on how far you can do that?”

“Not really. The limit is what you can see to move into, and checking to be sure it's

clear. You can even move beside yourself, just far enough away to clear yourself,” said Muriel.

“I think you're seeing possibilities with these skills that you never suspected. Ways they can be used in your job,” said Nancy.

“You know it. I can also see how to get away from aggressive men in a bar. Just leave.” And Melanie chuckled. “That'll larn 'em!” And they all laughed.

“B-A-D accent,” quipped Nancy.

So they practiced going back and forth to Melanie's room and the office until she was secure in how to do it. She even did a trip with Muriel and Nancy in attendance to her apartment in Washington and back. And was thrilled.

“Now,” said Muriel, “I don't know whether you know this, but there are other dimensions. And we're going to show you how to see them. Like seeing souls or seeing the stripes on your arms – all three of them – it just takes a trick of seeing.”

“Three of . . . OH!” Melanie said, looking at her cuffs. “I passed another test?”

“Yep. A biggie, but easier than some that you've done. Now, distance doesn't matter,” said Nancy.

“OK, here's how it's done. See it? Good. Now, there's one dimension that's very close. It kinda overlays the dimension that earth is in. Here's the visualization. Got it? Reach out and check it for clearance. Good. So, let's go there. Go ahead.”

And Melanie was standing in a large square facing a vacant lot. “What . . . ?”

“There used to be a hill there. And a throne on top of it,” Muriel said. Melanie shivered.

“And the souls of humans came here to be judged . . .,” Melanie said.

“Yes,” said both Nancy and Muriel.

“Oh.” Melanie looked around, then looked at Nancy. “Then you're”

“Yes,” Nancy said. “Envoys are messengers. What's an archaic word for messenger? And that's us. And now we follow Ted and Muriel. Notice I didn't say serve. We follow because we choose to. That was the first big change. The second was that we weren't superior to humans. That's why we don't wear the stripes on our uniforms, even though we know the basics well enough to teach them.”

“And I'm really here? It's not a dream?”

"You're really here. Shall we go back to my office, now?" asked Muriel. "You can always come back any time you want."

"And you made me do it, didn't you. This is Home. And I see why Ted called it that, now. This really is Home. And we CAN go Home again." Melanie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "OK, Let's go back to your office."

Ted was waiting for them when they came in. "Melanie, how many stripes have you earned?"

"Three," she said. "Unless that last trip earned me another one."

"It did." And another stripe was added to her cuff. "But there's more," he said, like an infomercial. "What's your favorite gem?"

"Amethyst, I think."

"Good choice. Look at your cuff." And a translucent purple with flecks of white ribbon braided itself into a Turks head knot on her cuff.

"You've got good balance. Good judgment. Of yourself and of others. Only to be expected from Law Enforcement. These are set so only you, us, and Envoys can see them – anyone with the training, that is - unless you want someone to see them. There may be times. They're your 'certificate' of having passed the basic tests. You'll add more skills as you go along, and new ways of doing things. But they all build off of these."

"Now, in your 'no pocket' is a green booklet, about 3 ½ inches by 5 inches, and not very thick. Would you get it, please?" asked Ted.

On the cover was a strange design, like two letters intertwined or overlapped, that seemed to stand off the cover somehow. Under it were the words HOME PASSPORT. "We'll add diplomatic status if you ever need it. That shows that you made it Home and back on your own, and are thus considered a Citizen of Home. There's a certificate inside saying so. But since there's no customs and immigration here or there, it's pretty much just a memento. But we thought you'd like to have it," Ted added. "You've got bragging rights that nobody is going to believe, unless they see you in action. I hope that you never have to use the skills that way."

"You don't have to go back, right away," Muriel said. "You can stay as long as you like," Muriel said. "And you can always come back if you do leave. Your room in the Guest House is yours until you leave. Coming back, you'd have to get a new one, but the price is the same. Free. You've earned it. I'd suggest that you stay a day or so, to detox from a very active day, but that's up to you. You're welcome in this office, you can talk with anyone here, anything."

"I'll stay. At least for a while. Maybe practice some more. Like you said, talk with people. See how you run things. Oh, wow, this is big," Melanie said.

"Yep. And we're always here to help. You're linked to me, and can link to anyone else you want to. And you can always call on us," Muriel said. "It's part of what we're here for."

"What about others. What if others want this training?"

"Well, the first few times, it might be best if you simply watched and helped. After that, I don't see any reason why you couldn't train them. If they want stripes, bring them here and have them show us what they can do, and us big-shots will be happy to put them on." Muriel grinned at the officer.

"You mean, ME train them?"

"In time," Muriel said. "Like I said, it might be easiest to have us do it the first few times, with you, showing you how and walking you through it a bit. But after that, I don't see why not."

"Me . . . train . . . unreal."

"You know, Muriel, you just outdid yourself. One day. Now THAT'S unreal. You do know that I expected it would take a year to train people," said Ted.

"Yea, well, you were always lazy," she replied.

Ted sputtered. Then stopped and laughed. "Girl, you haven't known me long enough to say that."

"Yea," Muriel said, and grinned. "But Mata has. Us girls talk to each other, you know."

Chapter 23

Seeing the Sights (Saturday)

Melanie took Muriel up on her word, and talked with others in the office. Squad members that now she realized were all Envoys. Kids, with their own Envoy guards, Mata. She thanked Nancy for helping her learn to make clothes, and Nancy grinned. She saw the way the office was organized, how all Muriel's squads could be there at once, talking, joking, watching TV, all without disturbing Muriel or the active squad or Mata.

She went and visited Ted's office, though she was nervous about doing so. But when she walked in the door Bart, met her and seemed overjoyed that she'd earned her stripes and so quickly. And he, personally, showed her around the office, showed her the differences between Ted's and Muriel's offices and explained why. Met members of Ted's security detail and found out that they were as nice as Muriel's were. Also found out something that at first shocked her. Envoys don't have gender. They simply put on a male or female look to suit the purposes. Which meant that Nancy . . . Melanie blushed. She'd been undressed in front of a guy that looked like a girl. But not really a guy. The Envoys were quick to make sure that she realized that they didn't have the feelings and urges that humans did, because they really didn't have bodies.

And they showed her some tricks that they thought she might like to know. Like how to make a mirror. Or how to make one that saw her like someone else would see her. Like how to make every day objects, like a notebook and pen. They also showed her how to do things like make herself glow, or create light in dark areas. Even sunburst light, so that an opponent would be blinded, but she wouldn't. And they grinned. They obviously were having fun teaching her little things.

Then she went to her room, just translated there, and tried making a wardrobe of 'pretty' clothes for when she wasn't on duty. And discovered that she could still call her guns out of 'no pockets', no matter what she was wearing. Even a bikini. And watching that in a mirror made her laugh. But now she realized what had happened to Don's bat when he'd taken it back.

But she called it an early night, determined to go back to Muriel and ask if someone could show her some more. From her experiences today, she didn't think there would be a problem. There were always squad members not on duty. Surely, one of them would help her.

She decided to eat in her room, and three Envoys showed up and politely knocked on the door, then brought in table and dinner and set up for her faster than she'd ever been served before. The food was great, and one of the Envoys said that their cook, a human, had been a chef in a major New York restaurant, and had come out to see the sights. Liked what he saw, and jumped at the chance when offered the position, here. And he always had the

basic menu ready to go at a moment's notice. The Envoy noticed the stripes on her sleeve, and just nodded and said, "Good!"

Finally she crashed, exhausted, and dreamed strange dreams, but woke up energized, like she'd had a week of just relaxing in the sun or something. Showering was a bit different. She had to learn to pull her shield back into herself. But drying off was easy. Push the shield back out, and the water just sheeted off it, pushed away by the shield. Getting dressed was even easier. She just thought her suit on. Clean, crisp looking, yet soft to her. She could really get to like this kind of living.

Muriel's off duty squads were overjoyed to see her. They also offered to show her around Enclave, and how they had tried to make it attractive to humans. One building with art works that would have put the National Gallery to shame. Sweeping landscapes that looked like one could walk into them. Starscapes that almost gave her vertigo. Miniature pictures of people that looked like photos, but weren't. Sculptures that told stories all their own without moving.

And back at the squad-room, learning how to get out of handcuffs by thinking them away – pulling them out of a 'no pocket'. But most of all, showing her that she was no longer defenseless, no matter how she was dressed or what she was doing.

A couple of the women Envoys went back to her room with her, and produced pictures of various types of clothing and went over her wardrobe with her. They suggested adjustments to some of them, and grinned along with her at the pleasure of shopping without shopping, and always getting a perfect fit.

Lunch was caught in the squad-room, trading banter with the squads and kids. And she found out some of the background of the kids, and why they were here. They were all friends of Muriel's, and she'd brought them here to show them what she was doing. Then ended up training them. They admired her stripes, too. Especially the amethyst braid. And after talking with them for a while and trading banter and teasing with them, realized what the big difference between Muriel's office and Ted's was. Muriel's was geared to the attitudes of a child just beginning to grow into being an adult. Ted's was that of someone who'd been an adult human for a while before gaining the skills of the Envoys.

The biggest thing she learned from them was that whatever one Envoy knew they all knew. So when Muriel discovered a better shield they all learned it in very short order. And when the kids each learned in their own way they all knew the differences and why they were different. Because the kids all had their own way of thinking and their own experiences. And it opened up Melanie to just how different Envoys were from Humans.

Muriel came back to the break-room while Melanie was there and asked how she was doing. "Great. But I feel like I'm trying to swallow the ocean."

Muriel laughed. "That'll pass," she said. "I'll admit that I pushed you a bit. But you showed the capability of handling it. I especially wanted you protected as soon as possible. But after that, it was a case of 'how much can she learn, how fast'. I wasn't trying to be nasty,

but I wanted you free to be able to return to Washington whenever you felt you needed to. Getting you dressed, getting you your stripes if you wanted them, teaching you to translate and to be able to go Home. Then we felt that, whatever you wanted to do after that, you should be able to. So, what do you think of Enclave?"

"I've got a job," said Melanie.

Muriel laughed again. "Yes, and we're not offering. But it's a second home for you, any time you feel the need to break away."

"This place," said Melanie, "it's different. I'm learning a lot just seeing how it interacts. And the difference between yours and Ted's. And the difference between both and the way things are done in the Secret Service. And the similarities. It's eye-opening."

"Yea. This used to be a blank warehouse. They asked me what I wanted in my office and where, then they took over and did it in about fifteen minutes. It was a shock. I'm still learning about Envoys. They're always nice, always helpful. They don't judge. It's quite different from being the victim of a bully every day at school. MUCH better. I never have to worry about bullies again."

"How so?" asked Melanie.

Muriel brought up the schoolyard episode on the TV and let her watch. Halfway through, Melanie said, "That's YOU!"

"Yep. Only three stripes at that point, and holding my own against all the bullies in the school. And the principal."

"Oh, my gosh. You weren't kidding about being able to defend yourself. And without even looking," said Melanie.

"It's the nature of surprises that you don't know they're coming. Like Don and his baseball bat. That's one of the advantages of a permanent cylindrical shield. NOTHING gets through, even if you aren't looking at the time. And anchored, you don't even feel it. What told me she'd shot at me was the sound. But you can do other things with shields, too." Muriel led Melanie back to the kitchen.

"I want you to think of a glass. Don't make one, just make a shield that is shaped like a regular eight ounce glass. Then put it under the water faucet without touching it. Turn on the water."

"Oh, cool! Wait a minute! What can hold water in can keep water out!"

"Yep, you're fast. Yes. So, a boat that's leaking – you can't get back to shore – patch it from the outside with a shield. Tell the water in the boat to go away, and you're back in action." They both giggled at the image.

"OK, you've got the boat patched, but the motor's out. How do you get back? Create an oar?" Melanie asked.

"That's one way. Can you think of another?"

"Anchor a shield behind it, and expand it?"

"Possible," Muriel said. "Is there an easier way?"

"Duh, PULL yourself in. just reach for something on the shore with your mind, and pull. Or even just translate the whole boat and all."

"Yep. See what's available to you? You can jack up a concrete slab to get someone out from underneath. Speaking of which, you should meet Mark."

"OK, who's fainted this time," said a male voice. Muriel laughed

"Mark, meet Melanie. Melanie, meet Mark. He's what we use for a doctor for humans. Mark, she's a Secret Service officer, so behave yourself."

"So what's up?" he asked.

"I was wondering if you'd be willing to give her some extended first aid pointers."

"Possible. Melanie, what's your background?" he asked.

"Marine. Grunt then Law Enforcement. Then Secret Service. Normal bumps, scrapes, knife wounds, gunshots, broken bones."

"OH! Great. OK, give me a minute. What I'm going to do is create a package that I can dump in your mind. Don't think about it. It'll slowly open up, over the next day or so, and provide you with battlefield medicine from an Envoy's point of view. Things you can do to stop bleeding, permanently. Reduce fractures, Patch people up in general. Basically, save lives. You won't even need to think about them, the information will just be there when you need it, like you learned it years ago and never thought of it again. I'll even toss in triage. You're line of work, you'll be apt to need it sometime. How's that sound?"

"Like I'm getting a college course for nothing," said Melanie.

"More like a Master's degree, but yea, that's the idea. When we get done, we can paint a big red plus on your back," he said, grinning. Melanie grinned back.

"Just what my division needs, a squad medic and battlefield doctor," she said.

"You got it. Now, just a minute." Mark thought for a couple of minutes then linked to her. ::Ready?: he asked. At her nod, he sent the package to her mind.

"Now don't try to think of it for a couple of days. That's more of a load than Muriel and her friends received. It'll take time to settle in your mind," he said. "Anything else you need? Muriel? No fainting spells? Shucks, and I thought it would be something important!" He grinned and left.

"What was that about the fainting?" Melanie asked.

"The first three times I met him was because of people fainting around me. It became a joke that the only time I called him was because someone had fainted," Muriel said with a chuckle. "I finally got with him, the other day, and got some basic first aid. I may ask him to upgrade my education, though. In the field I never know what I'm going to face. And it won't always be me that's a target."

"Yea," said Melanie, "and it isn't always when you're on duty. I was witness to a traffic accident. Two kids badly hurt, and I felt helpless. I won't any more. At least once it's settled."

Mark popped back in and said, "Muriel, I was just thinking. I should upgrade what I gave you. You never know what you're going to face, when. And it won't always be in your line of work."

"What IS it about this place. A girl can't have ANY secrets," Muriel exclaimed, while Melanie and Mark just laughed. It only took a moment, now that Mark had it all packaged up. Then he disappeared again.

"You see how it is. These people are wonderful. And VERY protective of me. But they aren't creative, you know. It takes a human to think of some of these things. Of course, once it's been thought of it can be repeated." Muriel shook her head, and looked at her cuffs. "I sometimes wish that there was a way I could reward people like Mark, and the squad that acts as tutors for the kids and I. The things that they've been forced to come up with . . ."

"You don't need to," Mata said, from behind her. "The things you've been teaching us ARE the reward. We always thought that there wasn't anything you could teach us. But just being with you has taught us a bunch. And then the creative ways you do things. Amazing. And it just keeps building. Now, you've got a trainee that'll be going out into the wild, well equipped to handle anything she comes across. And the word will spread, and we'll learn even more. Nope. No reward is necessary. I'd say you earned your free room and board for life. You, too, Melanie. Mark's been looking for a way to get information out that could save lives. You just jogged him into it. And it will save lives, even if you never use it. Because now that he has it he can pass it on to others. We've never had so much fun in all our lives."

"Well, hopefully, it'll quiet down for us, now. I've had entirely too much excitement for one week," said Muriel.

Melanie agreed that she'd like it to stay quiet. Not because it had been so bad for her, but on general principles. Bad times meant that someone was getting hurt. And she'd seen enough of that as a Marine, and even in the Secret Service it was always the possibility that everyone dreaded, even as they trained for it. She headed back to her room, translating right

out of the squad-room, and supper.

The first thing that caught her eye was a note on her suitcase, at the end of her bed. She picked it up, and it read:

Ms. Melanie Carter,

The Management of Guest House would like to congratulate you on your accomplishments in receiving training from Ambassador Muriel. You are the first of our guests to take on such rigorous training, and to accomplish it in so short a time is further evidence of the quality of person that you are. As a token of our esteem and appreciation for you, we have taken the liberty of affixing a small emblem to the surface of the suitcase. This in no way will affect it's ability to function as you proposed. Should you decide that you would prefer to not have it, it can be easily removed with no harm to the suitcase.

Melanie looked at the suit case, and there saw:



It was the official emblem of Home. Just like on the document in her Home Passport. And it, too, seemed to hover above the surface. She could think of at least one of her friends, seeing that, and having her eyes bug out. She tucked the note, now as important as any other memento, in her suitcase along with her old suit and holsters for safe keeping.

Her dreams that night were as strange as the night before. She dreamt that she was walking the streets of Home, and friends now gone greeted her, and shook her hand or hugged her. Some even saluted. People that she knew were dead – Marines that she'd served with. And somehow, the dream didn't bother her.

Chapter 24

Tests and More Tests (Monday)

Sunday was a wash. The only thing of note was that Melanie went down to the front desk and asked to see the manager. She did assure the Envoy behind the desk that it was nothing bad.

When he came out, she said, "I just wanted to thank you for the note, and the emblem on my suitcase. That was very sweet of you to have done."

"It was our pleasure, I assure you. I've spoken with Muriel and Ted both. They were impressed that you'd come here to begin with. But to take the training and do so well, well it kind of justified what they both had hoped for the human race. Adults, if they have the right temperament, can take and pass the training."

"Well, I wasn't the first adult," Melanie said. "I understand that Muriel's parents were."

"Yes, yes. But they'd seen what some of it could do. You had less evidence to go on, and yet you came across the country to try to find out. And a Law Enforcement officer, at that. I think there will be more when they find out what you've done and what you can do. We're just glad that you're here and we can serve you."

"Well, if you would pass the word to everyone that's helped me that I thank them for all they've done I'd appreciate it."

"Our pleasure, Ms. Carter."

"Oh, Melanie, please. I begin to see Muriel's and Ted's reasons for just using first names."

The rest of the day was quiet. She did check in with Muriel, briefly, then went window shopping to see what Enclave had for fashions, and to look at the artwork again. At the gallery an Envoy approached her and ask if there were any of the works that she'd like copies of. He assured that reproductions, for her, would be no problem and of course no charge. The 'no charge' got to her, and she requested a few of her favorites, wondering where she could put them in her apartment in Washington. They were delivered to her room shortly after she got back to it. She also had a meal at a restaurant that had intrigued her when she first saw it. Again, they wouldn't accept any payment. She was a guest and a successful trainee, they assured her. Therefore there would never be a charge for her in Enclave. All the Envoys could see her stripes, and all of them knew what they meant.

Monday morning was a different matter. Melanie was rather nervous about the mission she'd set for herself. But she felt that it was something she had to do. So she got to the

office early in order to catch Muriel before the girl went for her school tests.

“Muriel,” she said as she entered the office, “would it be alright if I went to Home? There are some friends that were in the Marines with me that didn't make it back. I'd kinda like to see them.”

“Melanie,” said Muriel, “you don't have to ask. You've earned the right to enter any time you want. And you know the way. I did it on my first trip. When you get there, just think of them. They'll find you.” She grinned, then hugged her last trainee and said, “just go.”

So she went. Again she faced the vacant lot. She closed her eyes and thought of one of her friends.

“You don't have to close your eyes. I'm not that ugly,” a familiar voice said. “And the others are on their way.”

Sure enough, they all arrived on the heels of those words. Then it was hugs and handshakes and a couple of salutes. All of them saying how proud they were of her, and that it did them proud that one of their own had taken the training and been made a citizen of Home. They oohed and aahed over her stripes, and some commented that they expected that her fifth stripe would be amethyst. As they moved out of the square, some very puzzled people appeared in the 'judgment' spot. Envoys converged on them and reassured them, and led them off.

She stayed there the morning, since she knew that Muriel would be busy. Besides, her friends wanted to know all about Muriel and Ted. Were they nice? How hard was it to work with them or train from them. What was it like in Enclave. Melanie was almost late getting back to the office, only to find Muriel sitting at her desk laughing. Laughing so hard that it was a good thing she was sitting down, or she'd have fallen over.

“What happened?” Melanie asked, concerned.

“Oh, that old stick. I'm afraid I made a bad impression on her. Thank goodness,” and Muriel went on to tell her.

Muriel had walked into the room, ahead of her friends by some minutes, and seen the desks arranged three across and four back, with an odd one at the back. So she promptly rearranged them four across and three back with the odd one front and center. Without touching any of them. The proctor had immediately attempted to establish her authority by ordering her to put them back.

“Madam,” Muriel had said, “My name is Muriel. That's Ambassador Muriel to you. You are on Envoy property, the Envoy Embassy, to be exact. This is not part of the school system and you will abide by the rules of the leaders of Home and Ambassadors of this Embassy. You are here at the courtesy of the Embassy, to provide testing. Your purpose, I'm sure, is to show that our education is substandard. If so, then it is the fault of the school system to which we have been subjected, not the actions of the Embassy. The desks remain where

they are.”

Then the kids came in. Along with Mata and a squad, and all the kids Envoys. They grouped themselves around the room and affected a casual 'parade rest' without speaking.

“What is this!” barked the proctor. “You aren't allowed in here. There will be no cheating on these tests.”

“Madam, that's two. This is the Envoy Embassy. My Security Chief and one squad are here to protect me. And each of the other children has an Envoy guard. There certainly will be no cheating here. You will comport yourself with all due dignity and respect, but bullying will not be tolerated. Should there be a third outburst you will not receive a warning. You will simply be transported to the head of the school board, under guard, and your behavior will be reported. Do I make myself clear? Or would you like to shoot at me, like the principal of the school did. You saw where that got her.”

Then the poor biddy couldn't find a plug for her computer. Doug calmly broke ranks and established a power outlet close enough to her table for her to plug it in. In fact, he made sure it was up and operating before he returned to his place. All just as calmly as if it had been rehearsed. And all without saying a word. She glared at him.

Then she went into a long speech about how the computer would read the tests and grade them as the group turned them in. And that the group were all to have brought a number two pencil – which no one had told them – and that the grades given by the computer would be final. She handed out the first test and the answer sheet – would you believe multiple guess? – one at a time, then told the group that it had one hour to finish it and to turn over the tests.

So they started, and fifteen minutes later they started up to her table. One at a time, by the way. Muriel's test was run through the computer, while the proctor looked at her with a smug, supercilious expression. That is, until she saw the grade. 100%. Then the next, and another 100%. And the next, and the next, through the whole group.

“This is absurd!” she hollered. “You couldn't have gotten 100% on the test. The material was two grades beyond where you were!”

Then she realized what she had said. Muriel just asked Mata if it was finished. She held up one finger, then after a moment was holding a disk. Muriel's squad formed up around the biddy, and she transported them all to the Superintendent's office, and brought in the head of the school board. Mata handed the Superintendent the disk and told him to play it. Twenty minutes later the woman was fired, the kids were apologized to, and the rest of the tests were canceled. Well, they thought they were. They went back and took the rest, had the machine grade them, and noted, individually, that two of the questions were incorrect, in that the answers supplied and in particular the answer the machine would have marked correct, were absolutely wrong, then cited the authority to look up for proof. Mata delivered them to the school board head with the suggestion that there be no more tests by them, as the Envoys of Home were supplying better and more effective tutoring than the school could.

"And that ended the school board's attempt to bully us and make us look bad," said Muriel. "The Mayor found out about it, I understand one of the Envoy's leaked it to him and the press, and calmly pronounced the Enclave to be it's own school system. That information was also leaked to the media. I've just seen the TV report on it. Straight, factual, and the school board is being recalled. The only one left on it is the head. He honestly didn't know that the board had set us up to lose. The superintendent is also looking for a job. It was suggested by the news report that not even a career in the fast food industry would be available to him. And garbage collecting is a city job, and he's banned from any city job."

"Now we're free to jump as far ahead as we can take," Muriel added. "Which means that some of us may have Master's degrees by the time we're eighteen. So, how'd it go with you?"

"I met with them. They loved me," Melanie said.

"Of course," said Mata.

"They were proud of me."

"Ditto," said Mata.

"And they weren't mad that I was alive and they weren't."

"Also ditto." Mata grinned at her.

"And they want me to come back and let them know how things are going with me. Not going on earth, but going with ME."

"At the risk of repeating myself, again also ditto," said Mata. "The shock of death quickly fades, which is a good thing. Otherwise we'd have no people returning for another chance at life. They loved you when they were alive, so they love you now. You have good friends."

"I know," Melanie said, seriously. "And I don't deserve them. Well, I should be going. Even though I took a two week leave, I know there are things coming up that they could use me for. I'm going to miss you all. This has been hectic, but a lot of fun, too. And I never thought you'd even train me."

"Why wouldn't we," asked Muriel.

"Well, because I'm an adult. I knew you trained your friends. I just figured that you were only doing kids. And because I'm a cop, and one that saw you under what people might call 'poor circumstances'. And because I worked for the government, and you might not want to look like you were supporting the government, things like that."

"Piffle. You're the first adult that came to me and asked for training. I know you got

beat out of the top spot by my parents. But I didn't know about that until after the fact. They just went and got their Security Chief to train them. And they never completed it. They said that they'll get Home in due time, and there's no point in rushing it."

"As for being a cop, that acts in your favor. Oh, I know, there are bad cops, just like bad anything else. But from what I've seen more cops are honestly in it to protect people than be bullies. And you saw me in action. Period. It had nothing to do with you. It had to do with your boss. And I think that got sorted out. Remember, we brought him in on the C.I.A. thing. And he wasn't displeased with that."

"As for working for the government, well, we'll let our actions talk for us. We'll go where we're needed, when we're needed. Period. Ted even put that in the Treaty, that we could be called on in times of emergency. Speaking of which, you are always welcome to holler help to us. You've got mental links to us, and you know we can respond quickly, no matter where we are. We might not help in a war – or at least you might not consider it help – but natural disasters, internal conflicts with criminals or alleged criminals, yea, we can help."

"We'll miss you, too, and you're always welcome back. You do have time off. And you know how to get here. Don't be afraid to come back, even if it's just for the artwork and fashions," Muriel grinned, "you don't HAVE to see us."

Melanie stuck her tongue out at that statement.

"Look, can I make a suggestion?" Mata asked. "Let one of the squad go back to your room with you and send your luggage back for you. You haven't tried translating things ahead of you, yet, and you shouldn't try doing it with something you don't want to lose. As for the car, give her the keys and we'll take it back for you. We know what company you rented from, and they'll accept our bringing it back for you. It isn't like we're going to drive it there. That way you can leave right from the front desk, when you turn in your room key and only carry what you want to physically take with you."

"OK," Melanie said. "Yea, I can do that. And it would help, if you wouldn't mind. I was trying to figure out how to juggle everything."

"Oh, goody. I get to train you again," the familiar voice of Nancy came from beside Melanie. "This should be fun." She grinned.

"I hope so. And if you want to come to Washington and see my apartment, you can even do that," said Melanie.

"Now, that sounds nice. OK, I'd like to," Nancy replied.

"Oh, I'm going to miss you people," Melanie said, and Mata and Muriel hugged her. "Try not to find too many reasons to grab the President just to have a chance to see me." That caused some giggles.

But finally she couldn't put it off any more. Nancy suggested that they stop by her car

and pick up anything of hers that was in there. They transferred the suitcase she'd brought, and her laptop, to the bed in her room, Nancy showing her how to hold two images and tell the things where to go. Then Melanie took Nancy to her room, so she'd get a good image of it.

"Keys? Contract?" Nancy asked.

"Keys are here. Contract is in the glove box. I didn't know Envoys could drive!"

"Some of us can. I can't. Never learned. But I can translate the car to the rental place, and turn in the contract. There'll probably be a bit of a charge for gas. It'll either show up on your credit card or I'll take care of it. Like we said, they know us, and can bill Enclave. Be right back." And Nancy disappeared.

A sudden thought came to Melanie – one that she hoped wasn't the case. But she'd had premonitions before and learned to, if not trust them, at least investigate them. So she 'looked' at her apartment, and sure enough one of her friend's was there. The most nervous one, Diane. And she was muttering to herself, "come on, Melanie, where are you. You NEVER go out of town." Melanie got out her cell phone and called her friend.

"Melanie! Where are you?" her friend answered her phone.

"I've been at the Envoy Enclave. I'm on my way back. Look, Diane, don't ask questions. Just, for once, do what I say. It's very important, and I'll explain when I get there. OK? Just go sit in the recliner and stay there until I get there. You can watch TV if you want to, but STAY IN THE RECLINER. No matter what. I'll explain when I get there. Honest. I just don't want you to get hurt. OK?"

"Um . . . but"

"Diane, don't argue with me. Just do it. If you don't, I'll take my key back and you can consider us over. It's that important. Understand?"

"OK, Melanie. If you say so, but what if"

"There is no 'what if'. I don't care if the building burns down around you Do Not Move From That Chair. I'll explain when I get there, and then you'll understand. But not now, and not on the phone."

"I take it that a friend of yours is there?" asked Nancy. She'd come back to the room while Melanie was on the phone.

"Yea, and she's the WORST pacer when she's nervous. I don't want her getting in the way."

"Did we ever tell you that you CAN force a mental link, a temporary one, if you have to?" asked Nancy. "There's a reason why I'm asking."

"No, I don't think so."

"Then we didn't. OK, you know the 'knock on the door' thing you were taught to begin with?"

"Yea?"

"Well," said Nancy, "this is more of a battering ram forced entry. You bust through the door and give orders. This isn't for polite conversation. If she moves, do it. It'll give the show away, but it'll be safest for her. Or I can do it, if you prefer."

"No," said Melanie. "I'll do it. Um, how much can I tell her about where I've been and what I've been doing."

"You can tell her anything you like. You may not be believed, unless she actually sees it, but you can tell her. And you invited me along and I can back up anything you say."

Melanie took a deep breath and let it out, then said, "OK. So I translate my stuff to my apartment just like I did here? Can I move them around from here, too?"

"Yep. It isn't being there, it's knowing there by seeing it in your mind, just like translating. Oh, ho! You're going to pop them in where she won't be but will see them, then move them to where-ever you want them. That'll help keep her in that chair and out of the way. And if she does move, you can use that 'forced entry' to tell her to get back in the chair and stay there. Yes. Good. I'd like to monitor, if I may. Just in case you need help. But I have no doubt that you can do it. Go ahead."

Melanie picked up her things with her mind, so that she had a good feel for them and how to hold them. Moved them off the bed, again for the feel of it, then translated them to just inside the front door. In her mind, she could see Diane's eyes bug out. So she continued to move the suitcases and laptop into her bedroom and put them on the bed. True to form, Diane started to get out of the chair.

::DIANE!:: Melanie sent in 'command voice', ::STAY IN THE CHAIR::

She almost snickered when her friend scuttled back into the chair and drew her feet up. First, she sent her key back down to the desk, and let the Envoy on duty know it was there. Then it was time for she and Nancy to translate to the same place the luggage had appeared.

Chapter 25

The Trials of Having Friends (Monday afternoon)

Diane's eyes bugged out again when Melanie arrived in the apartment. She jumped out of the chair, hollering, "Where have you been!"

"Hello, Diane. I'd like you to meet Nancy. Nancy is an Envoy. She was one of my trainers. I went to the Envoy Enclave and asked Muriel if it was possible for me to get some training. HOO, boy did I get training. And now I'm back. I TOLD you I was going out-of-town. But, of course you didn't believe me. Just like you didn't believe me when I told you to stay in the chair. Sorry I had to be rough on you, but do you have any idea how dangerous it would have been if you'd walked through the place something was appearing in?"

"Oh. But you don't understand. Willie the Creep is trying to get you thrown off the squad. I HAD to see you and warn you."

"Ever here of telephones? They make them in nice, small, compact sizes that don't even need wires to operate, now," Melanie said in a quiet voice and with a grin. "You could have called me. As for Detail Chief William, who likes to check that I've got my gun with me as an excuse to stare at my breasts, I think he's about to get the surprise of his life."

"Diane, hit me," Melanie said.

"What?"

"Hit me," Melanie repeated. "Right here. I'll even put my hands behind my back. Not a 'girl hit'. Hit me like in training, but don't pull the punch."

Diane executed a near perfect punch to Melanie's abdomen that never connected. It stopped short, and her mouth dropped open. "He can't even reach me, now. I had a twelve year old kid swing a baseball bat at me, testing my ability to shield. Never touched me. Oh, and I've got some 'battlefield first aid' training, too, as well as a few other things. Now, be polite and say 'hi' to Nancy."

"Hi, Nancy."

"Hello, Diane. I'm very pleased to meet you. Both for yourself, and for the fact that you are one of Melanie's friends."

"Are you really an Envoy?" Diane asked.

"Yep. I'm one of Muriel's security detail. When Muriel was training Melanie, she needed an adult female to show how the uniforms were constructed. We decided that a

uniform wouldn't be appropriate for Melanie, particularly in light of her job, so instead we taught her to make her suit."

"Taught . . . taught her to make her suit." Diane looked dazed.

"Oh yes," said Nancy. "Among other things. She really was quite a good student. Even Ted said so, when she met him."

"You met Ted?" Diane asked Melanie.

"Of course. It was a bit of a shock, at first, until I learned to relax some. But he's a nice guy. Muriel's nice, too. Quirky and a kid, but very nice. A good trainer and a lot of fun to be with."

"Just . . . just how much training did you get?"

Melanie reached in a 'no pocket' and pulled out her new passport, and handed it to Diane. Then she caused the stripes on her sleeves to become visible while Diane was reading the certificate inside the passport.

"I got that much training. The same basic training that Muriel has. And I've been to Home. I know what it is, and where it is, and can go back any time I want. I can shield myself enough that bullets just stick a foot away from me. I can do things, like moving my luggage from my room in the Enclave Guest House to here, then moving them onto my bed. Then moving myself the same way. I can change clothes without having to duck into a room away from men. Like this," she said, and promptly changed into one of the formal dresses she'd seen, then back to her suit. "And I can talk to people like Ted and Muriel and Nancy, and a LOT of others with my mind."

"Oh . . . , then Diane noticed the stripes. "OH! Oh, my gosh."

"And now, I think it's time I dealt with Little Willie. He's been harassing me for too long. Two years too long. But I'm going to need witnesses. Then I'm going to drag him up in front of the Superintendent and demand that he be fired immediately. He may still face criminal charges for sexual harassment, but I want him out of the service. He's giving us a bad name, and he's only getting worse because he gets away with it."

"Oh," Melanie added. "That's one other thing I learned, and learned from the champion bully buster: Don't put up with the bullies. I think everyone in the country has seen what Muriel did in that schoolyard. Do you want to come with me? Be a witness to William's behavior?"

"Yes! Heck, your whole squad will act as witnesses to how he's treated you since you joined the squad!" Diane said.

"Even if it means a rather unorthodox method of transportation?"

“Yes. He needs to be exposed for what he is.”

“Melanie,” Nancy asked, “could I come too? You might need some extra, shall we say, force to back you up.”

Melanie looked at Nancy. “It’s what we do,” Nancy added. “We’re protectors.”

“Like Hansel and Gretel?” Diane asked.

“More than you know,” Nancy said softly, with a smile. “More than you can realize. I can even make it look like that Dream Pantomime, and call others to join in the fun. Wings are a bit much, and tend to get in the way. But anything for a good show.” Then she snickered.

“Then let’s go,” said Melanie. “He’s in his office. We’ll come out in the hall in front of it. Then I’ll open the door and walk in. Stay behind me, then. OK? Good. Here we go.” Melanie took Diane’s arm and the three translated to the hall. William was seated looking through the window in the door – Nancy had caused a bell-like tone to sound, loud enough to attract attention all over the floor – and appeared to have jumped a bit. His eyes were certainly bugged out.

Melanie never had a chance to open the door and walk in. William came storming out, demanding, “Where’s your gun, woman.” He immediately reached to pull her coat open and down. He never made it. His hands stopped a foot from Melanie. And stuck.

“You know? William,” Melanie said in a soft, calm voice, “I get real tired of you pulling that stunt. You may not realize it, but it’s sexual harassment. And in the workplace, it’s a criminal offense. As to where my gun is,” she drew from the hip, out of a ‘no pocket’. “Yes, it’s loaded. Yes, there’s one in the chamber. No, the safety isn’t on. Are you wearing a vest?” Suddenly, she had another gun in her left hand. A bigger gun. “This one’s a .45. Bigger bullet than the 9 millimeter. Slower muzzle velocity. Nice big messy hole. Oh, and it’s in the same condition.” She put them away. “I qualified on a lot of different weapons. Want to see what I carried in the Marine Corps?” and a fully automatic battlefield rifle was in her hands. She let go, and it disappeared.

“Now that you’ve seen that I am, in fact, armed, it’s time for you to go before the Superintendent for formal charges. The bullying stops. Now.” She un-stuck his hands and grabbed his ear, mentally, and like a naughty boy, and dragged him toward the Superintendent’s office. People in the hall flattened themselves to the wall. Members of the security detail she belonged to joined in behind Nancy, until the whole squad was with her.

Melanie made the Superintendent’s door fly open before she got to it, which definitely got his attention. Melanie dragged William’s ear into the office, and William obligingly followed. Diane and Nancy followed, but they stayed behind her. Her squad gathered at the door. They knew good theater when they saw it. Or so they thought.

When Melanie released William, he hollered, “Why you LITTLE . . .,” and drew and

fired at her head. The bullet stopped one foot away from her face, and she never flinched. She grabbed the gun, mentally, while also grabbing William and rendering him unable to move. She brought the gun closer to her, pulled the magazine and put it on the Superintendent's desk. Then she ejected the cartridge from the chamber and locked the slide back. The cartridge she put in the magazine. Then she picked the slug out of the air and placed it, and the brass she retrieved, on the Superintendent's desk. Without touching any of them with her hands.

William suddenly found himself whirled around and his hands drawn up behind his back. Handcuffs appeared and locked onto his wrists, and he was turned back around. Muriel pulled her badge out of a 'no pocket', walked over to William and placed a hand on his shoulder. "William Connelly, I arrest you on the charge of attempted murder of an officer of the United States Secret Service. Other charges, such as sexual harassment in the workplace may also be applied. You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney one will be appointed by the court. If you give up your right to silence anything you say can, and will, be taken down and held against you in a court of law. Do you understand your rights as I have recited them to you?"

William merely nodded.

"Excuse me, please . . . would you excuse us, we need to get in there . . . yes, thank you . . . excuse me"

The voice was familiar to Melanie, and she just put one hand to her face and, without looking back, said, "Ted, did you bring Muriel, too?"

"Of course. And both our details. When Nancy hollered, we thought it might be a good idea. We should have known better. We'll send most of the squads back. No sense cluttering up the halls," he said.

"So, now you know, Melanie," Muriel added. "It can stop a bullet. It can stop a lot more than just that, by the way. But why do you have to make such a big production of it?"

"Just copying my teacher," Melanie said. "After all, us adults can't be shown up by a mere youngster."

"Oh, right. Pick on me because I happen to be smaller than you," Muriel quipped back.

"Of course. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?" They both laughed, and Muriel went and hugged Melanie.

Ted said, "Sir, it's come to my attention that this person has attempted to kill a Citizen of Home. This, of course, is covered in the Treaty we have with your government. He will be judged in Home, according to our ways. We are, however, patient. We can wait until your court system has dealt with him. Or even longer, come to that. Everyone goes Home sooner or later."

"I'm afraid to ask this," said the stunned Superintendent. "But may I ask who you are?"

"Of course. My name is Ted. I am Ambassador to earth and the United States for the people of Home and those on earth known as Envoys. I also happen to be the Leader of the People of Home. The person currently hugging your officer and in general acting like a child, mostly because she is one, is Muriel, Ambassador to earth and the United States for the people of Home and those on earth known as Envoys. She is also Ambassador to Home for the people of the United States, and she is a natural born citizen of the United States. The person she's hugging I'm sure you know by name and that she is a citizen of the United States. She also happens to be a Citizen of Home and has recently been made an Ambassador to the people of the United States. Melanie, if you would show him your passport, please?"

Melanie pulled it out of a 'no pocket' and noted the word Diplomat, which hadn't been there before, on the top of the cover. She handed it to the Superintendent. He just looked at it, numb, and handed it back. Finally, he sagged back into his chair.

"Too many shocks," he muttered.

Immediately, a figure appeared next to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "No, he's alright. Heart and lungs good. Could use a bit more exercise. Cholesterol is up a bit. Muriel, we've GOT to stop meeting like this," said Mark.

"My fault, this time, I think," said Ted. "Or Melanie's. Muriel actually behaved herself."

"Oh, she always does," said Mark. "But people around her still end up faint. Actually, I can understand why. I feel faint around her, too. You'll be alright, now, sir," he said to the Superintendent. "Just a bit of a shock. And you'll feel better and a bit stronger, now, too. Don't be too alarmed if your doctor looks at your tests and just shakes his head. I corrected a few things to make you feel better." Then he exited as precipitously as he'd come.

"OK," the Superintendent said, tiredly. "Somebody get him out of here and booked. And collect the evidence, too. I wish we had a record of this. NOBODY'S going to believe it."

"Sir, if I may," said Nancy, "I'm afraid it's only from one point of view. There just weren't enough Envoys here to make it multiple views or three dimensional." She handed him a computer disc. "It does take in from when we translated into the hall to the point where this William nodded that he understood his rights."

"You can do that?" he asked.

"Of course. We keep them for record of our work with humans. Very inventive, humans."

"You know? I'm beginning to think that we should have some Envoys, here. Ambassador Ted . . .," the Superintendent started.

“Just Ted. We only use titles when we absolutely have to, like being formal.”

“OK, Ted. Can we contract for a few Envoys to work with us?”

“That's possible,” said Ted. “It's also possible that your officer, Melanie, could train a few of your other officers. We'd certify them if they took the whole training. We'll have to do some experimentation to see if Humans can make the records, like the Envoys do. However,” he added, “if you're just talking about non-combat situations, we might just loan you some. Why don't you come by our office some time and we'll hash it out. Ask Melanie and she'll send someone to get you. Or, if she's not on duty, she can bring you herself.”

“She can do that?”

“Of course. She brought . . . Diane? It is Diane, isn't it?” at her nod he went on, “she brought Diane from her apartment. Muriel took twelve kids with her on her second trip to Home. It's not that much work. Mostly coordination,” Ted said.

“Sign me up for the training,” said a voice from outside the office. “I don't care what it costs or where I have to go to get it.” “Likewise,” said another voice. A general concurrence from the rest of Melanie's detail mates broke out.

“Listen up,” Melanie turned around and said. “Can you macho males take instruction from a mere woman?”

“Melanie, we'd take instruction from a dog if that's the way to get it. From you, we'd take orders. How about that, Superintendent? Can we have her as the Detail Chief?”

“You all feel that way?” he asked.

A chorus of 'yes' and 'you bet' and the like met his question. “OK, Melanie, you're it. How long to train them? We can't keep them off of duty too long.”

Melanie looked at Muriel. “Two days seems normal. Might go as much as four. If they're like you then only one day. We'll send a guy out to help with the clothes thing.”

Melanie looked back at her boss. “Figure four days or less. Some depends on whether or not they can pass the first test. Give me about fifteen minutes and I'll have an answer for you as to how many can do it.”

“The first test weeds out the bad ones,” Muriel said. “If they've got dirty secrets that they don't want anyone to know, then they won't be able to pass the test.”

“OK, take your group down to the break-room and find out. I can cover four days of you idling on the payroll, no sweat. And a Detail trained like you are could do more than just protect the President. We may have you training others, later, too. Now git. I want to talk to Ted and Muriel for a bit.”

Melanie moved out of the office and gathered the group around her. Talked to them for a minute, then they suddenly disappeared.

"I wish I could learn how to do that," the Superintendent said.

"Close your eyes," Muriel said. "Picture me as a door. Reach out with your mind and knock on the door." She waited a moment. Finally he opened his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry," she said.

"You mean that's it? That's the test?"

"Well, part of it. The important part. A trainee has to be able to link with the trainer. Everything after that uses that same basic skill for training and monitoring," Muriel said.

"OK, lets get down to it. What's it going to cost to train that Detail?" the Superintendent said.

"Your person. Your payroll."

"That's it?" he was incredulous.

"We don't charge for training. The reason is that the trainees will pay it forward. It's even possible that they will pay for it with their lives, but we hope not. Even if you sent them out to us. We'd put them up, we'd feed them. We'd train them. No charge," said Ted. "That was decided even before I found Muriel and started her on the training."

"Now, about combat people. We have very few that understand what that is, and right now they're filling eight squads – our security details. I don't know if you know this, but Envoys can't kill. They also can't judge. They're protectors, and that's it. But the 'that's it' covers a whole lot. Say an articulated truck overturns trapping people under it, and they're alive. Try to move the truck, and the people die. One Envoy, one truck, and the people are safe and getting first aid before the police and fire can even arrive," Ted grinned.

"As for administrative, we've got a few that could do it. Service oriented people. And yes, ANY Envoy can train. Muriel was actually trained by the Envoy that became her Security Chief. And that was spur of the moment. I had Mata test her, only Muriel ended up testing herself. And after that the race was on. With only three stripes she held off a gang of bullies and stopped a bullet a foot from her. And that event was about a week ago. She was trained in two days. Melanie beat her. She trained in one, and Muriel trained her. Think she's good enough?" The quizzical grin Ted gave him dared him to say 'no'.

The Superintendent was astonished. "But, how do you make any money?"

"Oh, Enclave has shops, restaurants, things like that. Visitors to Enclave pay for what they get. It's less than outside, and the quality is generally better. Employees – and we do have Human employees – have food, shelter and basic clothing, oh and medical, and you got

a taste of that, free. Guests, in other words people we invite in – and invitations are informal – get the same treatment. Melanie, for example, came out to ask about training. How she heard about it, I don't know. But she talked to Muriel for a few minutes and her status changed from Visitor to Guest just like that. When Muriel was a target of bad press and a certain government official, she worried about her parents. They were brought in and given the same privileges as any other Guest, with the addition of a security squad put together on the spur of the moment. They've even taken some of the training, but not completed the last stage.”

“We do have some big contracts,” Ted went on. “Roads, for example. And buildings, where the local laws allow them. They don't meet most building codes. But they're better, stronger, less affected by fire, things like that. It pays for coffee and cakes.”

Chapter 26

The Detail Chief (Monday afternoon and Tuesday)

Melanie came back into the Superintendent's office and simply said, "Pass."

"All of them?" the Superintendent asked.

"Yep. They're at the point where they need to make their own clothes. They all could link, so I taught them how to see souls, taught them to find their power, and taught them shields. That was the longest part of it. I had to pull rank to keep them from punching each other. They were having too much fun," Melanie said with a grin. "This is one determined, focused bunch of guys. I figure tomorrow I'll teach them to translate, and show them how to get Home."

"OK," said Muriel. "I'm going to hang up my license. You're talking about HOW many guys in one day?"

"There's only fifteen of them. And I did it just like you did with me. So if I can get a guy to shepherd them through making their own clothes, they'll be good to go, tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Ted," said a male voice. Bart had arrived. "We need a room with no windows, not even in the door. Five at a time. It'll take the rest of the afternoon. I've got a squad with me to do the dirty work."

"How many people does it take to train them?"

"Ideally," said Bart, "from what knowledge we have, one on one."

"How about one trainer and one model?" said Muriel. "It doesn't take long for an Envoy to see what the clothing is and how it fits. And one trainer can monitor and coax them into it, since most of that is talking them through it. They actually train themselves. Two guys and five trainees. They just cycle through them. Fifteen minutes and they should have it down. Do you have three rooms?"

"No, but we have the theater. We use it for A/V, and it's not permanent seating, because we also use it for other functions. Flat floor," the Superintendent mused a bit, "yea, that should be large enough. And the chairs are already put up, so you won't have to do that. Yea, that should do. Large enough to break up into three groups. But you need six people, and your squads are only five."

"I have been known to do some work, from time to time," Bart said.

"Of course not often," Ted added. "Which is why he's my Security Chief. Lazy. Gets everybody else to do the work for him."

"Unlike Ted," Bart responded, "who only gets twelve year old kids to do it for him." Then they both grinned.

"OK, the guys know where to go, and will lead the squad, and Master Bart, who's good at baiting," Melanie said.

Bart put on a long-suffering face. "Do you see what I have to put up with?" Then to Melanie, "You learned too much from our wild and uncouth Ambassador."

"Why Bart," responded Muriel, "I am not wild. Just uncouth. Psst, what does uncouth mean?" And everybody laughed.

When the mass of men and Envoys left, Melanie's boss asked, "Why didn't YOU train them?"

"The first thing that they have to do is take off all their clothes," she responded.

"Oh. No. That wouldn't be good. Especially with you as their Detail Chief. It would cause all sorts of discipline problems," said her boss. "Muriel, am I mistaken or is your security detail all kids? Or isn't that your security detail?"

"Yea, it's my security detail. But don't let size and apparent age fool you. They're all Envoys," Muriel said.

Mata walked up to him and said, "Shake." The Superintendent tried, but his hand passed through Mata's. "Try again." And this time it connect with something solid. "Envoys aren't human. We only look human. Envoys don't have gender. And we don't age. We can take on any shape that suits us." and Mata grew and turned male, still holding the man's hand. "My name was Matthew. Matt, for short. The story of my shame is that I bungled it. I had to quick turn into a twelve year old girl. And when I introduced myself to Muriel, I said Matt . . . uh. And the minx ran with it. So I stayed twelve and female and named Mata, and trained her. Including getting here through making her own clothing. I didn't think anything of it, and she seemed to accept that I was female."

"I'll never underestimate her again," said Mata. Come to find out, even before I started teaching her to make clothes, she'd figured out I was adult, male, and it didn't matter. Things I'd said while training her about lack of gender and looking how we wanted to. That underage forty-year-old is just too smart. So smart that she keeps coming up with new things to surprise us. Like training in two days instead of a year. Like showing how a defense can be used as an attack. Like how to train a gang of unruly kids all at once."

"Envoys aren't human. We're souls. Souls without body. Ted has said that he'd like to see us finally get bodies, and in a sense we're training for it, now. We watch Muriel and her friends. They're still trying to learn to be human, themselves, and it actually makes it easier to

see, watching the firestorms they go through, growing. And we serve as a buffer for some of them, settle them down and help them understand themselves, and help shape their attitudes. So it's a trade-off that pays us as much as it helps them."

Nancy, who had come back with Melanie and stayed quiet through the whole thing, suddenly stiffened. Ted caught it. So did Muriel.

"Muriel, show Melanie how," he said, quietly. Melanie turned toward Muriel with a questioning look that suddenly cleared. "Oh. OK."

Bart came up. "What? You're still here?" he said to Ted. "They're done. You're right, Melanie. They're one dedicated bunch. You should be proud of what you've done. Caught on right away with only a few boggles. We even taught them a few of Muriel's tricks with 'no pockets' and shields."

"OK, yayhoos," Melanie said. "Put your arms up where you can see them." She looked them over for a while, then closed her eyes and concentrated. When she opened them her detail just looked at their cuffs with wonder. She raised her own arms to show them her stripes. "You've got three more to go. The last one depends on how balanced you are, not on something you learn. That's the colored one. So, if you still have unresolved issues, you need to clean them up to get it. In the mean time, you might consider what gem you'd like to have as a colored stripe. Oh, and by the way, normally they'll only show to Envoys and those that have gone through this level of training. You have to let others see them."

"Now," she added, "Go home and detox. You've been through a lot. Tomorrow's sessions will probably be much easier for you. But at least one of them may impact you hard. So, after that's done and you've got the rest of your stripes, we'll call it a day. Go." They went.

Melanie turned to her boss. "I want to give them something else, too. It's a package of knowledge. 'Battlefield first aid'. It's almost surgery. It means that if they come on an accident or something, they can treat the victim right there on the spot, and they'll walk away whole. Like what Mark did in checking you out. But it'll take a couple of days for it to unpack and settle in. I'd like them to be off for at least a day after I give it to them."

"You've got it. You're still way within the time-frame you estimated. And that would be something that could be very useful in our line of work," he said.

::Mark, can I disturb you for a moment?:: Melanie asked.

::Of course. Who fainted.:: He chuckled in her mind.

::Can you show me how to package up that 'battlefield surgery' to deliver to others? I've got fifteen guys that are going to get their fourth stripe, tomorrow. They're all Secret Service.::

::Yes, I've been following your progress. Very well done. And I'd be happy to come

and give it to them, myself, if you don't mind. It isn't that I don't trust you. I do. And I'll be happy to show you how it's done. Or better still, I can show you how to store the package I've got and apply it so it'll unfold properly. It's that I'd like to see them get their stripes, myself, and congratulate them.::

::Oh, wow. Yes, of course you can come. I'll let you know when they're all back from Home.::

Tuesday brought mass mayhem to the offices of the Secret Service. Detail members were bouncing off each others shields with gay abandon. It took a little coaxing and threatening on Melanie's part to get them to quiet down. Muriel was back with all four of her squads. They'd act as monitors for the trainee officers. The initial spot for the translations was to be the same A/V theater. The other end, though they didn't tell the trainee officers that, was to be the street outside Muriel's office. Muriel was going back with Mata to monitor their arrival.

And the training began. Melanie explained what they were to do, and how they were to do it. Muriel's squad leaders would give them the rough image of it, and make them find it and be sure it was clear. Then they would step into the image they made, with the Envoys linked to be able to go with them. They all went individually once.

Then the popcorn machine started, and the troops had a blast. Mata was linked to Muriel to be sure the area was clear of one troop and Envoy before the next one went. After each had had a chance to go three times without the careful monitoring, Melanie called a halt.

"We're going to hold off handing out your third stripe for a bit," Melanie said. "There are some people that I'd like to get as greeters on the other end." Melanie translated to Home and called her friends, asking them if they'd be willing to help, and asking if they'd mind wearing their old dress uniforms. She got a unanimous 'yes' from them, and they assembled across the vacant lot side of the square. Melanie took a good look at them from the distance that she thought the troops should stay away from her friends, then translated back.

Her friends, apparently played it to the hilt, and came to attention and saluted each of the fifteen officers when they arrived. Between that, and the impact of being in another dimension, and one that they'd been told about all their lives, they all came back moved. Some to tears. So Melanie took the time for them to calm themselves to go back and thank her friends for their help, and tell them what condition her new troops had come back in. Again, they said they were proud of her and what she was doing, then left about their own business.

Muriel had called Mark as soon as the popcorn explosion was done and told him that the trainee officers were going to Home and would be back in about a half an hour. He showed up partway through the peregrinations and waited until Melanie was back. He watched her apply the next two stripes to their cuffs, and was impressed by the seriousness of the officers.

"You now have four stripes, and are wondering where the fifth one is. You've done

everything you were asked to do. But wait, there's more," said Ted, in his best TV sales pitch voice, and the massed trainees chuckled. "Put your hands up and think of your gemstone." When he sensed that they all had a clear image of the gem, he created the fifth stripe, and goggled. All of them had chosen Amethyst.

Before they could disperse, Mark strode up. "You've all been trained on how to protect. As Secret Service officers, and many of you from other training such as the military, you all know how to kill. What I'm going to provide you with is how to save."

"My name is Mark and I'm an Envoy. As much as you'd like to chuckle over how that sounds like the start of some meeting that many of you might need," which immediately drew the chuckle, "I am what passes for a doctor for the Humans in Enclave. What you may not have realized is that your earth-bound hops were to Enclave. To be precise, to the street facing Ambassador Muriel's office. Since nobody goes there it was considered the best blank space for you to train in translating."

"So, if you'd all just make your minds blank, if they aren't already," which drew more chuckles and some outright laughter, "I'll pass this package to you. It'll open on its own and settle in. You don't have to think about it. When faced with a medical emergency of battlefield type conditions, it'll just kick in for you. Now, hold on." He gathered the massed links of the troops and sent the package to each of them, making sure that each had one.

"Thank you," Mark said, "and congratulations to you, the newest Citizens of Home."

Then Ted spoke up, "If you'd all check your 'no pockets' for a small green booklet and look at it" Fifteen hands moved in different directions to their 'no pocket' and drew out the green passports. "You will not be made diplomats, since you are working in jobs that require other skills than diplomacy. You will note on your certificates that you are listed as guardians of Home and it's children. In time you will understand what that means. For now, it's a polite way of saying that, because you could go Home and back under your own power and alive, that you are considered Citizens of Home, and are welcome to come back any time you wish."

Ted stepped back and Melanie moved up. "You are all dismissed until Thursday morning. You've done great and should be proud. But you also need time for it to settle in so that you can get back to serious work. And what we do IS serious. But it's also satisfying and something to be proud of. I'm proud of you all, and thank you for not making my first training gig a bust." And that brought outright laughter. "Oh, the Marine Corps Honor Guard that met you are all friends of your new Detail Chief. They are friends that didn't come back to our country, but died for it. Think about that and the honor they gave you and the pride they have in you and in your new boss." And the group broke up. Some to translate home, some gathering in groups and talking, some just sitting semi-collapsed gathering strength.

"You did good, Melanie," Ted said. "you did very good. And you knew when to ask for help and had an idea of what you needed. And asking your friends to be an honor guard. Well, most of these people were military. And the rest at least understood the honor they were being given. That was a nice touch. Even better was your telling your detail that these

were people that had died for their country and were proud of them. Between being in Home and that, I don't think they'll ever forget what they're supposed to be doing."

"By the way, Mark asked me to tell you that he's sending that package out, tree fashion, to every Envoy in Home and on earth. And it will be included in the training of every human that goes the distance. Muriel's friends are getting it now. You gave him the push he needed to actually get that out. Before, only you and Muriel had it. Even I will be getting it when I get back. Bart's just waiting to give it to me." He smiled.

Melanie laughed, outright. "Are you people always like this?"

"Oh, a little bit," Ted said. "But since Muriel came, more so. Be like children, full of fun, teasing, and wonder. And wild and unpredictable and outrageous. And willing to learn and teach. These are the first 'Citizens of Home'."

"That should be written down somewhere."

"It was," said Ted, sadly, thinking of a book he'd grown up with. "Long ago, and not in that form, but it was. And it was taken the wrong way by people who never understood what children were really like. And so, they taught it wrong. All . . . this . . . time."

Melanie went and checked in with her boss, letting him know that the training was done and she'd given the detail the time off until Thursday morning. He agreed that they probably needed the time to get used to the idea of having talents like that, and suggested that she might do the same, but to think about how to best use the team. So Melanie ended up going back to her apartment.

Nancy asked, mentally, if she could come in, and Melanie welcomed the company but wondered why. After all, the training was over.

Nancy didn't keep her in suspense. "I wondered if you knew anything about those pictures you got from the gallery."

"Not really, just that they were beautiful."

Nancy smiled, "Yes, they are that. That particular gallery isn't often visited by Humans. They usually find them strange and disturbing. That's why the staff took particular note of the ones you liked or that moved you. These aren't the originals, but they have some special characteristics and retain what the artists were trying to do. You see, these were created by Envoys. Envoys that were trying to understand what art is. They aren't really painting, as you think of it. That's why they seem to have a depth that Human paintings and even photographs seem to lack."

"I don't understand the process itself. I think they're making it up as they go along, to tell you the truth. The other thing about these miniatures is that they aren't really miniature. The gallery sent them to you in a form that could be packed. This one, for instance. When you saw the original, where were you thinking it should go?"

"I've got a spot over here," Melanie said, pointing to a wall that just didn't seem to go with the apartment decor. "And I wondered how something like this landscape would fit there."

"Uh, huh. And this is too small. However, if you take the corners and draw outward . . ."

"Oh, my gosh! It expands!"

"Yep. And just like that, you can fill the space nicely. Notice that the picture stayed in proportion. All of the ones they sent you are like that. One of the things the artist was trying to do was give people what they wanted or needed, but he realized that, unless he knew who was getting it and where they wanted to put it, he'd never get the size right. It was the one that became manager of the gallery that figured out how to overcome that, and how an artist could just work and not worry about such things."

"So, this artist just worked to express something he was beginning to feel. It teased at him, nagged at him, and finally he set to work on it. When it was finished the gallery took it and put it up in a prominent place. In time, they knew that the one or ones it was meant for would see it and visualize where it should go. That's all they hoped for. You did. And you are the first. The best way you could thank them is to let them see where it is, where you decide to mount it, and the effect it has on the location."

"I'm probably not saying it right . . .," Nancy said.

"No, I think I know what you mean. Is there a way I can record, like you Envoys do, so they can see it?"

"Yes. It really isn't difficult, and that's the other thing I think you'll find useful in your new job. Your reports can include what actually happened, just like I gave your boss. In time, you can show your Detail how to do it. Then you can collect all those recordings and put them together . . . well, when that happens call me and I'll show you how it's done, and how it can be played back. I think you'll find that they'll even hold up in a court of law."

"So, first, let's put this where you want it, and how you want it, and I'll show you how to make the recordings," Nancy said. "Then tomorrow, since you have managed to take the day off, you might take the recordings to the gallery. It'll be the best payment you could give them, and it won't cost you anything but a bit of time. But it will show your appreciation."

They spent the afternoon putting up the pictures, with Nancy coaching Melanie on how to record the room, the placement and the effect. The effect, not just on the room, itself, but on her. They went, room by room, placing and recording. Then Nancy showed her how to transfer it to a CD-ROM that could be read by any Human computer. But could also be read by special equipment the Envoys had created that would show them the effect the works had on her.

Chapter 27

Secrets and Collaboration (Wednesday morning)

Melanie translated to the street outside Muriel's office, and walked toward her famous science fiction doors that whooshed out of the way. Sure beat the automatic doors in the shopping malls that you had to time just right to not break stride and wait for the door to get out of the way. Most people might not notice that. But to one like Melanie, who grew up marching with her Marine Corps dad, and trying to match his stride with her five year old legs, such a pause was a glitch. It was an interruption in her life, a measure of her not having been in time with the world, and a reason, even sub-consciously, to try harder.

The realization of her feelings, the conscious re-evaluation of that memory and how it translated into the woman she'd become, the behaviors that she had, and how they'd look to someone that was built without those feelings . . . well, it was almost overwhelming. Yet she never broke stride. Back straight, head high, purpose clear, she kept going driven, almost without thinking about it, to achieve that purpose. The reflection was there, the realization, but it didn't stop her from doing what she intended to do.

Nancy had given her a key that, she was just beginning to understand, was to unlock for Envoys just what it was to be human. Or at least A human. And her target, well actually both of them, were coming to meet her.

"Nancy, before you say anything, link. I think I have your answer." And Melanie showed her what she'd just experienced, how she'd experienced it, what it referred back to and why, and how she'd responded yet kept going. "I think that's a bit of what you're looking for."

Nancy just stopped, eyes wide open in wonder. Then she started to cry. And grin. "Yes. That's what we're missing. Relationships. Purpose. FRED! The connections you were talking about, and emotions. Catch." And Nancy sent Melanie's realization to him.

"OH! Yes. Oh! I didn't take into account how much effect past relationships had on humans. Yes, this is valuable!" And he went back to work.

Muriel had been standing behind and off to the side of Nancy while this went on. "I caught what you were saying. Yes, I think this is what Ted's trying to do, and I think you found the path."

"No, I found A path. The generalization may work for all humans, to one degree or another, but it's very individualized. This is only a part of the puzzle. And it's all Nancy's fault. She showed me how to make recordings that would not only show the what, but the effect." Melanie stopped for a moment and thought. "I don't know that even the Envoys can understand Humans, collectively, the way they seem to want to. But they can understand

them individually. And best by becoming Human. I think Ted realizes it, too, and that's why he wants Envoys to be embodied."

"May I see the recording you made of the pictures?" asked Muriel.

"Of course," said Melanie. "Do you have"

"Yes," Muriel said. "I have the equipment to get what you see and feel as well as just the physical placement. Nancy probably didn't explain it, but it's like recording music with various tracks into a stereo recording. Monophonic playback will give you the music. But stereo will give you the feeling of the placement of the instruments, too. And Surround Sound, or any of those, take it even further."

"So," Melanie responded, "what the Envoys record, and what Nancy taught me to record, also includes a mental track. And, perhaps without realizing it, in my case it captures my feelings and emotions."

"I had hoped" said Nancy. "I wasn't sure it could be done. I'm still not. I'd like to see the recording, too."

They went to Muriel's office and put the disk in her computer. They rearranged chairs so they could all see the screen. And, like an audio track to a video, Melanie's feelings and emotions came through along with the pictures and their placement in her apartment. And Nancy sighed.

"It worked," Nancy said. "And Steve is going to be so thrilled to see this. This is deeper than he'd dreamed. It also shows some limitations of how he's doing his work. It can be improved."

"Yes, I was wondering what he would charge for a commissioned piece," Melanie said.

"Nothing. The payment is right here, in your honest expression of what he's done. Envoys don't need money. They need . . . if that's even a term that can apply to Envoys . . . they need to know how humans react to things. And each other."

"So, lets go and see what he thinks. That is," Melanie said, "If you're free."

"Yep. Off duty and just hanging out. Oh, and Steve has his studio behind the gallery. In fact, that's the reason the gallery even exists. So we should be able to see how he reacts to your recording and your idea of a commissioned piece."

So, they went to the gallery. Muriel joined them, out of curiosity about the gallery – she'd never seen it – and to see this remarkable Envoy that could create such works. When they walked in the manager immediately came up to Melanie, wanting to know what she thought of the miniatures. She just handed him the disc, and suggested he play it, and play it for the artist, too. So the manager called Steve into his office. He entered, nervous, unsure of what kind of reception he'd get. The grin and hug from Nancy helped. So did the

compliments of Muriel. But he focused on Melanie. He didn't have long to wait. The manager played the disc, and Steve got his answer.

"You understand," he said with relief.

"Yes, as far as it goes," Melanie replied. "The pictures draw me in. But the closer I get into them, the more I'm aware that there's nothing around the picture but frame."

"I know. It's a limitation. It detracts," Steve said, despondent.

"What if you created a work without a frame? One that the viewer could enter, get to the center of, and turn around and view it from there. Like walking into a transparent cloud, or something. The space-scape would be a good place to start."

Steve thought. "Yes . . .," he dragged out. "Yes, I see what you mean. But how could it be displayed?"

Melanie looked at Nancy and Muriel, and passed a thought, a question, at them both. "Oh, an image, but like one that's solid only without being solid," said Muriel. "A . . . what are they called, a . . . um . . . hologram. That's it. Only not projected, but self-contained. Like static light," and passed the idea to Steve, mentally.

"YES! Excuse me, I need to start right away. Excuse" and Steve left the room.

"You've given him something precious," the manager said. "And I think what you're saying is that you can place it anywhere, but when you want to view it, you can draw it in to you. Yes. I understand. And I'll make sure that that part of it is the constant."

"You know," he went on, "you're the first human that has entered the gallery. We sometimes get Envoys in, and they like the works. But it's not the same. They don't react the way you did to the works. And I think we're too far out of the way for most humans to find. Enclave is a big place. Bigger than most shopping malls around here."

"Maybe you need another exhibit. Something like what I did with the apartment," Melanie said. Not just the works, but the impressions of a human viewing them. That would be for the Envoys."

" 'Pictures at an Exhibition'," said Ted, who had joined them quietly. "A musical composition by a Russian composer – Mussorgsky. Human. He did it to honor a friend who was an artist, and had died. His friends got together and had a gallery present them. Then Mussorgsky walked through the exhibit and musically tried to show his impressions, complete with him walking. Yes, something like that might draw Envoys. Art from a human point of view. Or, at least one human's point of view. It would take someone like Melanie, who can make a record, to do it, though." You could almost hear 'hint hint' in his suggestion.

Melanie took the hint. She left and started by coming in the door, seeing the first work on the right, looking at it, feeling it, then moving on to the next. Around the gallery she went,

until she reached the end of the left side, then moved back out the door. She stood there for a moment, then went back in with a disc in her hand.

“Something like this?” she asked. The manager put it on, and was flabbergasted.

“Yes, something like this.” he said. “Now all I have to do is manage to get a few Envoys to see it. It’ll draw others, that way. Let me find a place to put it.” He hurried out and looked around the gallery. Finally, he found a spot near the first work, and set up a computer with the disc running.

“I have a confession,” Nancy said in the manager’s absence. “Steve has been a friend for a long time. I like his stuff, but never understood it until I got the leakage from Melanie. I’d hoped, so I leaked the location of the gallery, hoping she’d see it.”

“Well, you succeeded,” Melanie said. “And I appreciate it. And I hope the Envoys do, too.”

“Um . . . well,” said Nancy, “I leaked the fact that you did the walk through, and that it’s on display.” A sudden quiet commotion happened in the front of the gallery. Four Envoys that Melanie had never met were gathered around the computer. “Oops,” said Nancy. “I didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

And Ted busted up, laughing. “No, Nancy. You didn’t cause trouble. You just made this poor man have to try to find a larger space for the gallery. I think you achieved your purpose.” And started laughing again. After a shocked moment, Nancy joined him with giggles.

A few minutes later individual Envoys were asking if they could get a copy of the disc, while outside more Envoys were lining up to view it. Steve came out to see what was going on, walked over behind the Envoys grouped around the computer, and got enough of the impression to realize what had happened. He nodded, then went back to his studio.

Melanie giggled, “I think he liked it. Well,” she went on, “I think I’ve caused enough damage around here. I think it’s time to be going.”

“Come back to the office with me, Melanie,” Muriel said. “I’d like to talk a moment.”

“Oh, oh. That sounds serious.”

“Not really, or not that much,” Muriel smiled.

They translated back to the office, the casual area, and Muriel said, “What you did, today. That was good. Just like what you did, yesterday, getting your friends to salute your trainees. I don’t know if you know HOW good, though. It was something your friends needed to see, that there were others who were ‘in the business’ of standing between the civilians, like me, and those that are violent.”

"Yea. I need to see if my father is still up there. I really didn't consider it, because he died when I was still young. Ten years old. But I've got to try," Melanie said. "He needs to know I was always proud of him."

"Then I won't hold you. I know that your image of him might be a bit blurry. If calling 'dad' doesn't get him, try his name and rank. Oh, I got that hint from my ever faithful Mata. And if that doesn't work, Mata can try a search for him. Or maybe your friends can, Marines tend to stick together, even from different eras. Don't give up. I have a hunch that he's just waiting for you to ask. And he won't criticize you for seeking your friends first. Enough said. Eat first? Or just go."

"Go. I'd be too nervous to keep anything down right now. And thanks, Muriel."

"You're welcome."

Melanie translated directly from her office. When she reached the square, there was a figure standing with his hands behind his back, faced away from her and staring at the vacant lot that used to be a hill.

::You know, when I got here, this was a place of judgment,:: a voice in her head said.

::Dad?::

::Yes, Melanie. What you did, yesterday. That was good. You made your friends proud. Oh, why I'm here? Mata told me you'd be searching. So I thought I'd save you the trouble::

::Thanks, dad. You know, you're the reason I became a Marine::

::I know:: He turned around and walked toward her. ::And now Secret Service. I've watched. You've always made me proud, but never more than pushing fifteen trainees through and bringing them here. Or, well, not bringing them here, but bringing them to the point where THEY could get here themselves::

::If I'd realized . . . if I'd known, I would have asked you, too. To be part of the Honor Guard for them. I just didn't think you would have waited around::

::Oh, honey, I couldn't leave you until I knew you were safe. And you really didn't need me for the Honor Guard. It needed to be people you knew, that you'd fought with, that had died around you. I'm not saying I'm not special to you. I'm saying that, at that moment, it had to be a part of you that was honoring them. And it worked both ways, you know. Your friends felt it. And you made the last line of the Marine Corps Hymn real, too: 'They will find the streets are guarded By The United States Marines.'::

::Dad . . . I've always been proud of you. Yes, I felt lost when you died. So did mom. But we knew why. We knew the warrior's need. I knew then that, if I could, I'd be a Marine and do my best::

::Well, and you did. And became a Secret Service officer and put up with that jerk harassing you all the time. I worried about that, until you got your training. I would have been here to meet you, but I wasn't fast enough. You translated out just as I got here. But I knew you'd be back, sometime, so I wasn't worried. This time, with Mata's help, I could be here waiting for you.::

::How did she find you?::

::She knew my name. She knew your friend's names. Or Muriel did, which is the same thing, really. So she came up and called, met me, told me some about you. She's impressed, too. Then we set it up, that if she could find out you were coming she'd let me know. So, when you talked to Muriel, she knew. That's all there was to it.::

::Sneak.:: Melanie giggled. ::I'll have to thank her.::

::Oh, that 'battlefield surgery' thing? That's genius. I'm glad you've got it. And I'm glad that you got it passed on to your Detail. That's Officer thinking. Get the troops as prepared as possible, because the enemy is going to be, and they like to surprise you.::

::I know. And I've thanked Mark for it, and will pass on your comments. I think he'll like that.::

::What you're doing with the Envoys, letting them see what you see in art. That took guts.::

::Not really. It was just my impressions, not really my thoughts. But it helps them to understand what humans feel.::

::It's still good. You're good. And I'm keeping you from your lunch. You should go. I'll be here whenever you want, whenever you can get away. But do things for you, and not for the memory of an old man who died before you could really grow up.::

::OK, dad. If you say so.::

::I do say so. Muriel's fidgeting, and Mata's looking smug. Go shake them up a bit. Like tell them you couldn't find me. Then let them hang for a while before you tell them that it's because I found you.:: He grinned. ::Yea, up here we learn to be as bad as Muriel and her brood are.::

::Yea, I see that. And I'll take you up on it. You'll probably hear Muriel scream all the way here.::

She translated back to Muriel's office, dejectedly. Shuffled across to a chair and dropped into it, head down and looking like she'd cry any minute.

"What happened?" Muriel asked.

"I didn't find him," Melanie half whispered.

"WHAT!" they both shouted.

Melanie couldn't help it, she started laughing. But she kept it quiet and covered her face with her hands, so all that showed was the same type of shaking that she would have had if she were weeping. But, oh, it was hard to get the next words out.

"I didn't find him," she choked out in a half wail. "Because he found me." Then she let the laughter roll.

"You minx. You little . . . no, I can't say that word. My mother would wash my mouth out, and she's bigger and stronger than me," said Muriel.

"That's alright," said Mata. "I can say it. I'm older than you."

"Except that you can't either, because I'm here and I'm underage," Muriel responded.

And Melanie just kept laughing. Finally, the other two joined her. She'd got them both, but good. And in her mind she could hear her father roaring with laughter.

Chapter 28

Accidents Happen (Wednesday afternoon)

"NOW I can eat lunch," Melanie said. "You don't know what a relief that was. And thank you, Mata, for getting ahold of him for me. He was standing there waiting for me when I got there."

"No sweat, Melanie. I figured you might have problems, so I did what nosy Envoys do best. I asked around. In fact, your friends knew him and knew where he was, and had him get ahold of me. So it was an easy fix."

"So," said Muriel, "Where would you like to go to eat. Our treat." and grinned.

"I don't know. What's good?" said Melanie. "I really don't feel like anything heavy. A sandwich and pop would do me fine."

"Oh, heck. We can come up with that, here," said Muriel. "It's what we usually have."

"Chuck does a mean tuna salad, as long as you don't call him Up-Chuck," grinned Mata. "actually, we're thinking of putting him on permanent chef status. But he's resisting. He **LIKES** being part of the Security Detail. I have **NO** idea why. Some sort of fixation on Muriel, maybe."

"Na, he likes the action. And since we don't get much, that's what he likes. Lazy," said Muriel.

"Tuna sounds good. And maybe milk, if you have it," Melanie said.

"Yea," said Mata, "We have to have it. After all, we have a baby to feed." Muriel threw a pencil at Mata, which stuck a foot away from her. She was nice. She returned it. The same way.

"I thought you'd get the point," quipped Mata. Muriel stuck her tongue out and retrieved the pencil and put it away.

About that time three trays, balanced on nothing, came into the room. Two of them balanced nicely on the arms of the chairs, and the third slid onto Muriel's desk. "Now you know why I opted for chairs in here with extra long arms on them. The trays fit nicely on them," Muriel said.

Mata was right, the tuna was good. So was the conversation. Muriel told her about some of the things her office had gotten involved with, like the kids and her learning how to record events, including their feelings and reactions. There had been some question about

whether the kids should get the 'battlefield surgery' package. Then the kids found out, and there was no longer a question. They went directly to Mark and got it. They'd gotten it Monday, when Melanie had talked to Mark, so the package had opened up and settled by now. One of the 'on duty' squad was now monitoring the police/fire/rescue channels on the scanner. With people trained to handle emergencies, it seemed only polite to help the city.

The kids were also involved in learning about various trades and professions, trying to find out if they had any natural tendency to any of them. So far, three of them had looked to have direct potential for some, and the rest showed tendencies toward groups of them. Nothing had shaken out for sure, yet, so the study was still on. Part of the reason for the search was that they wanted to feel useful as Ambassador's for the Envoy, despite the fact that the Envoy felt that they were doing fine the way they were, and felt the kids should just relax until they had more education and experience.

Ted's side had always been involved with the political aspects. But now was branching out into business and religion. The media had settled down, and some Envoys had gone over their business practices, showing them where they could save, and where they could make some money. The litigations had stopped. Even the shareholders had agreed that they were costing more than they were bringing in. Come to find out, the same bunch that had been pushing putting down the Envoys and Enclave were the ones that had ordered the litigations. The media outlets were now beginning to break even, and looked to increase their revenue stream in the future.

Business, on the other hand, was being recalcitrant. But with them no longer getting the funding from outside, they were on hurting status. Reorganizations and bankruptcies were looking to be in the near future. Ted, tired of their 'but it's not traditional' attitude, finally gave up trying and said that when they went under he'd buy them up and make them successful. But he'd also take them private, so there wouldn't be the shareholders screaming about wanting more profit all the time and pushing the board in the wrong directions.

Religion was a problem. People would find out soon enough what the reality was. So Ted had no problem if the religions wanted to continue. But no more high-handed tactics, door to door salesmen, or violence. Violent leaders found themselves subject to 'accidents' that took them out of the picture. So people stopped following them. In a few countries laws were passed that it was illegal for a cleric to advocate violence as a means of fostering their 'religion', and clerics were rounded up in droves. They tried to resist, legally, and found that juries were unsympathetic to their cause when they heard the clerics own words as they were recorded during services.

Politics, though, was a mess. Politicians that had been bought couldn't believe that the gravy train had derailed. So Ted finally had a long talk with the top legislators and made it plain that passing laws that benefited only one small portion of the people, or benefited business over the needs of the people was not going to get them re-elected. He didn't QUITE go to god mode, but he gave every indication that there would be a reckoning. A couple of them ended up taking an unscheduled trip Home, which sobered them up quite quickly, and suddenly Ted had help in convincing the others. But it was still a long, uphill climb. He was now considering having a talk with the Supreme Court, but wasn't sure how to handle that

one, delicately, yet.

Lunch had settled, comfortably, and Melanie was about to go back to Washington, when an alert from the 'on duty' squad came in. A ten car pileup on the interstate, starting under an overpass. Traffic was blocked and backing up. There were likely injuries due to the nature of the pileup – a tractor-trailer unit had jackknifed and landed on two cars. Police, fire, and rescue couldn't reach them. The squad monitor had a visual from the mind of the helicopter pilot: he was pushing that hard that she didn't have to invade his mind. She passed it to Muriel and three squads, the kids, Mata, Muriel and Melanie translated directly to the median by the accident.

One squad immediately went back to the exit and created a red, slowly flashing sign that read 'EMERGENCY DETOUR'. Then worked their way back up toward the accident, lifting cars into open slots in traffic in either direction above them. Two squads and the kids began working on the cars in the accident, assessing injuries and assisting people out and into the median. Bumps and scrapes were ignored, for the moment. More serious injuries, like broken bones or excessive bleeding were dealt with right away. Even by the kids. The packaged training had kicked in. They might be sick later, but the kids were working now like extensions of Mark's hands and eyes, without Mark even being aware of it.

Muriel, Mata and Melanie were assessing the situation with the truck. Melanie immediately shut down the truck's engine. It had been still in gear, and the shaking was endangering the situation. The driver was out cold, so she just opened the cab door, released his seat belt while holding him in position, then lifted him out and placed him on a created pad in the median and covered him with a blanket. The police helicopter had long since left the scene, following the vehicle that had caused the accident. It had been replaced by three media helicopters, circling like vultures. Rescued people, including the driver, were under shields, shortly changed to one bubble shield.

Muriel and Mata looked at the cars under the rig, and found injuries. Two individuals with life-threatening ones. They took emergency procedures to reduce those injuries as much as possible until the people could be removed. Then the interruption occurred.

"What's going on, here. Who are you people." A police cruiser had finally made it to the scene, and the officer was being officious.

"Melanie Carter, United States Secret Service," Melanie said, showing her identification. "I'm in charge, and these people are assisting me."

"Assisting, my ass! I know looters when I see them," came the officious reply.

"Troop, you are now on report. You will stand aside until someone of at least my rank from your department has arrived, or you will be restrained. Do you understand?"

The officious officer made the mistake of putting his hand on his gun. Melanie, who had had enough of macho male bullying, promptly disarmed him, cuffed him, and stuffed him in a tight shield off to the side of the road. His vehicle, with its lights flashing, was removed to

an open spot on the median and away from the accident victims. Then she got really nasty.

Taking the officer's radio, she clicked the mic and said, "Dispatch, this is Melanie Carter of the United States Secret Service," and gave her location. "I currently have an officer under arrest for interfering with the rescue and emergency treatment of victims of a major traffic accident. I want an officer of the rank of at least Captain here immediately to take charge of the prisoner. Charges will be leveled against him for willful interference of an officer in the performance of her duties. And when I say immediate, I mean that I don't care whether you have him flown in by helicopter or ask the assistance of the Envoy Enclave to translate him directly here. In the mean time, if you can't get rescue crews here immediately, contact the Envoy Enclave and give the locations of such units and they will be transported. We have at least two individuals with life-threatening injuries trapped under a semi-trailer. Get cracking and get them here, and don't bother me with chatter. I'll be busy trying to get these people out and cared for." She released the mic and went back to the scene.

Mata said, "we need at least two people, maybe more, to lift the truck and right it. We need another two to help control the injuries on the victims, and extract them. One car had kids in the back, in car seats. They're alright but need comfort. They're in the median."

Melanie didn't even bat an eye. She mentally called one of her squads, even though they were off duty, and gave them a visual to translate to. And they came. She sent mental commands, and two men broke off and went to the kids, radiating calm reassurance and talking quietly. The other three went to the truck. Two of Muriel's squad members freed themselves from what they were doing and joined Muriel and Mata in stabilizing injuries. Then Melanie had her men grasp the truck with shields in such a way that they could slowly tilt it and keep it under control.

As the truck rose, Melanie opened up enough space in the trapped vehicles to extract the victims, who were promptly and gently placed on more pads in the median. Muriel and Mata went to work, and Melanie's three men finished righting the truck then came over to her.

"Guys, I'm sorry about calling you out, but we needed people that can think on their feet. We've got Envoys and kids out there treating bumps and bruises, and such. We've got an Ambassador and her Security Chief attending to victims, and I'm expecting an officious Captain any minute. I arrested an officer with interfering with an officer in the performance of her duties. And yes, I did identify myself. He called us looters."

"Man, Melanie, you don't fool around, do you? You organize this rescue party?" one asked.

"Nope, just the truck rescue. The rest was non-threatening enough that the Envoys and kids could handle it, themselves. And they did good. But it's a mess down here, and traffic is going to be backed up until late tonight, at the way things are going," Melanie said.

"So, what can we help you with, now?" the same one asked.

"Well, as soon as the rescue people get here to take charge of the children, you can all

go back home and relax. I really do appreciate you guys answering my call.”

“Go back and leave you to the tender mercies of an officious oaf? Not gonna happen, lady boss. We go with you. Charlie in squad two is with the Super, now. He's on the phone to the chief of police asking what the heck – I cleaned up the language – one of his officers is doing ignoring your identification. Ma'am, this is gonna be fun! We're sticking,” he said. “Even WE outrank a Captain. And you outrank us. And we got media cameras on us from all angles.”

“Well, if you insist. But you're really not on duty. I pulled you in because Muriel and Mata were busy and I didn't know who to contact at the Enclave,” Melanie said.

“Yes you did,” Ted said, coming up behind the Secret Service men. “You were just determined to not bother me. Never mind. I'm glad to see your people here. And I'm glad to see you as the officer on the scene. That's going to go a long way to ending this dispute. It would have been touchy if it had just been Embassy personnel.”

“Um,” said Melanie, “can I make a confession? I didn't even think of calling you. My first reaction was to call my squad. Force of habit.”

“Well, there's nothing wrong with your habits. You three dealt with the truck? And you just completed training? VERY well done. I might as well say it, as the government in this city isn't apt to,” Ted grinned.

“Sir,” said one of the squad, “Its an honor to hear that from an Ambassador. Usually we just hear that we're on report because we won't carry their bags.” And Ted laughed.

“You won't get that from me. If I don't carry them, I've got twenty-one people jumping to do it for me. In fact, they won't even let ME carry them. They say I'm not qualified.” And the Secret Service men laughed. “And here come the rescue squad.”

True to his word, two people arrived carrying yellow containers and wearing fire fighter's badges. They quickly went to the two people on the ground with red blankets and talked with Muriel and Mata. The blankets turned blue as they asked about the condition of the victims. They were assured that the conditions that were life-threatening were now resolved, and all that remained were more minor contusions and bruising, but needed rest and recovery and could do with being checked out at a hospital. So, they turned to the children and checked on them, relieving Melanie's other two squad members.

And just in time. “All right, who's the idiot who claims to be Secret Service?” an officious voice sounded. Six hands raised with identification. Oh, and stripes plainly visible on their cuffs. “Don't give me that crap, those are obviously forgeries. There aren't any Secret Service people in this area.” said the Captain.

And Melanie had had it. “My name is Melanie Carter, United States Secret Service, President's Detail Chief. Can you read? Are you competent to tell a real identification from a fake one? I don't think so. And, as the first officer on the scene, I'm in charge here. Oh, and

by the way, I outrank you. Check protocol if you don't believe me. And I have had it with your attitude and that of your minion who is under arrest. Now stand over there until someone competent is here to relieve me."

"Will I do, ma'am? This time it was a State Police officer. "Looks like you have this pretty well in hand. The only thing left to do is move the vehicles."

"Officer, once the victims are moved to a safe place, we can reduce the congestion by moving vehicles to the median to await tow trucks. Can you give us a few minutes?"

"Just a minute, officer," said the Captain. "I'm ranking officer here and I'm taking charge. Nothing moves until I say so."

"Captain, I gave you the opportunity to retain your freedom and act sensibly. Sorry, but you're interfering with an officer in performance of her duties." And from six feet away so there was no question of her touching him, she spun him, cuffed him, disarmed him, and placed him beside the first officer in a similar shield.

"Now then, sir . . . , " Melanie continued to the State Police officer.

"Ma'am, I'd be pleased to wait a few minutes if you can clear this mess. Looks like most of the victims have been taken by the rescue people. May I watch you in action?"

"No reason why not, officer. Muriel, would you like to do the honors?"

"Nope. You're in charge, Melanie. But can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure!"

"Use the kids. I think they're feeling left out." And Muriel grinned.

The last of the victims was transported, so Melanie turned to the kids. "I haven't had a chance to meet you all or work with you at all. What I'd like is to have one of you for each car, and two for the truck. Truck first, then line up the cars three across, three back and the odd one centered behind. Leave space for an adult to go between, sides, front and back, without stubbing his toe." The kids grinned, and took their places.

First the truck. Two of Muriel's friends grabbed it in solid shields, lifted it and straightened it out, then floated it to the center of the median near the overpass, but facing backward. As soon as it touched down, cars started flying through the air, landing softly on the median in perfect order. Total time for the operation, five minutes.

A child's voice muttered, "Who says we can't do an adult job."

Muriel chuckled. "No one, Don. Friends, you did yourselves proud."

Melanie turned to the officer. "Anything more we can do for you?"

"Nope. Your kids even cleaned up the debris. I've got two units coming in to block this lane for the tow trucks. What do you want done with them?" he replied.

"They go with us," Melanie said.

"Can I ask, why the truck is faced backward?"

"Oh," said one of the kids, "nose forward would have put it too close to the bridge abutment for the tow to move. But from that position a truck from the other side can just pull it straight out."

"And this young lady told you to do it?" the officer asked.

"Nope. She just told us what she wanted us to do. We decided how to do it and in what order the cars would be pulled from the pile and placed. Cleaner that way."

The officer turned to Muriel. "Ambassador, your friends did more than an adult's job. They did an adult's job with intelligence and purpose. I'll ask the office to send them commendations." And twelve grins broke out behind him.

He turned back to Melanie. "Ma'am, I saw your stripes. On all of these men, too. I take it that you've had the same training?"

"Yes."

"Uh, huh. Then I guess I better get myself to the Enclave on my next day off. I can't let the Secret Service show up the State Police, can I?" And grinned. "Ma'am, with your permission, I relieve you. Safe trip."

Melanie's squad formed up around the two local officers, and Melanie got the visual from Ted, who had been to the Police Commissioner's office, and all of them translated there.

Chapter 29

Don't Mess With the Best (Wednesday afternoon)

"You," Melanie pointed to a secretary with one hand while holding up her I.D. with the other, "out!" The secretary got out.

"Just a moment . . . ," the Commissioner said.

"You," she said, pointing at the Commissioner, "sit down and shut up. I'm angry. I've had it with officious fools, and two of them are standing here. Either they are asking, 'do you want fries with that' tomorrow morning or they're in front of a judge trying to explain why they were interfering with an officer in the performance of her duty in an emergency situation. Do I make myself clear?"

"But"

"DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR! The appropriate answer to that is 'yes, sir'. My name is Melanie Carter. I am the Detail Chief of the President's Detail of the United States Secret Service. Doubt it, and make a call to Headquarters. My number is on my I.D. And they'll confirm it."

The Commissioner managed to restrain himself and simply said, "Yes, sir."

"You," she pointed to the Captain, "I didn't have time to monkey with you in an emergency. I've got time now," and read him his rights.

"Now, Commissioner, your call."

A voice from her squad said, "I'd do as she asks, sir. I'm ex-Army Airborne, and I've had some tough sergeants. She beats them – begging your pardon, ma'am – and I don't think she was enlisted. I DO know she was Marine Corps. She's also the best boss I've ever had."

"They're not being offered a choice, sir. And yes, I understand that female officers are called sir. I served in the military, too. They'll go to trial. May I see any evidence you have?"

Muriel handed him a CD-ROM. "There's a record of her actions at the scene, as well as a handful of observers, including two of her squad. These are Envoy records, sir, if you happen to be familiar with them."

"I'm not. May I take a look at them? Or at least Ms. Carter's?"

"Of course."

The Commissioner put it in his machine and started it. Watched for a few minutes, then looked at the first officer. "You actually started to draw on her? Are you totally insane? No, you can't plead that in court. I'll have you psych-evaluated before you can blink." He went back to the record. Got to the Captains part, and stopped. "Two of you. Both alike as two bad apples, rotten to the core. There'll be no guilty plea allowed, either. You're going to trial and I am going to enjoy taking the heat for having you on the force, because I KNOW who hired you. And when the heat starts it's just going to get hotter for him."

"Sergeant," he called, "get your butt in here."

"MAKE A HOLE," sang out Melanie, and two squads made a path for the Sergeant without even realizing they'd moved until they were looking sheepishly at each other.

"Sergeant," the Commissioner said, "we are assuming custody of these two persons. There are their weapons. Take them down and book them. Interfering with an officer in the performance of her duty in an emergency situation. Place them far enough apart that they can't communicate."

When they were gone, Melanie turned to the Commissioner. "I apologize for coming on so strong"

"No reason to apologize. I think I'd have been even more vehement under the circumstances. My only questions are how did you manage to do some of the things I saw there, and why were you in our city?"

"To answer the second first, I was here to visit Ambassador Muriel, my trainer," and she held up her arm, showing the stripes on her sleeve. Five more arms were raised, with stripes: her squad. "As to the second, I think I just answered it. Envoy training. She trained me, I trained my detail. I called this squad in from Washington, on their day off."

The Commissioner's mouth hung open. "We're trained to go from point A to point B without bothering with what's in between," Melanie added. The Commissioner's mouth finally shut.

"Mr. Ambassador, Ms. Ambassador, I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to meet you before. I'm sorrier that this meeting was under these circumstances."

"That's alright, sir," said Ted. "Accidents happen."

Muriel just bowed her head and covered her face, shaking her head. "I REALLY wish you hadn't said that, Ted."

"Why?"

"Because it was a really BAD joke, and I wanted to say it," Muriel said.

"Forgive them Commissioner. They're always like this," said Melanie, trying unsuccessfully to not smile.

"Commissioner, come out any time, and we'll show you around and answer any questions," said Ted. "You can take that as an official invitation. Or as official as we ever get."

"Call ahead, and we'll even send a squad to get you, and you'll see what Melanie meant by 'going from point A to point B'," Muriel added handing him a business card with her phone number on it. "That will reach me directly." Muriel turned to Melanie and said, "I think we have some unfinished business. Come to my office when you're done." And then to Ted, "I think we're done here. Let's get out of this man's way and let him relax before Mark starts asking me why I'm over-stressing people again." And Ted, Muriel and her squad disappeared.

"Anything else, Commissioner?"

"No, we're done here. No, wait. You were a Marine?"

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"I knew some," the Commissioner said. "Good bunch. One stands out in my mind. Politest and gentlest person off duty, I understand. On duty she could strip the paint off the hull or the skin off a man without even thinking of it. She embodied the old idea of the RCMP, 'one riot, one Monty, that's about right'. I was a new ensign on the ship. Made the mistake of walking into a fight I didn't even know was going on. Ended up on my back with a busted jaw and broken ribs, and only half conscious. Then I heard a woman's voice ring out with 'make a hole'. She walked in, quietly and calmly, took one look around, and asked the guy who'd hit me what had happened. Turns out he was drunk. He had a reputation for being mean when sober. Drunk, you'd better tie him down. He swung on this woman half his size and never connected. She punched him once in the abdomen. Lifted him off his feet and put him on the deck. About that time the corpsman came and had me taken to sick-bay. Never really knew what happened next."

"I was over-enthusiastic," Melanie said. "He had a broken arm, too, from when he'd swung at me. I blocked it hard before I hit him. Three busted ribs and they had to repair his spleen. He DD'd out taken off the ship on a long-line from a helicopter. And I ended up getting chewed out for arresting him by the worst Captain the Navy ever had. He threatened to end my career in the Marines. And yes, at that time I was Military Police. No one else wanted to go up against that guy. Five of us to cover a ship with over three hundred men. The Captain didn't like having a woman detail chief on the ship, but no one else would take the job, and I was new. Long story. I'd started as enlisted. That, by the way, was my last hitch. We docked six weeks later and I went straight to the I.G. and reported the Captain. He ended up DD'd out, too, but that was after I resigned. I heard about it, later. So YOU were the guy on the floor. Glad to see that you recovered alright."

The Commissioner looked down and shook his head. "Funny world. So now you're Secret Service, and still the reason the riot ended. Ma'am, If you ever have the time off and

want to do some clean-up work on the side, I've got a bunch of jerks like the two you arrested that I inherited from my predecessor. Or, if you just want to stop by and swap war stories, you'll always be welcome. And I will go see Enclave and talk to the Ambassadors. If they can train you to do some of the things I've seen done then maybe I need to explore that training. Take it, if they'll train me."

"Anyway," he went on, "I think we've got this covered. Is there a way I can get ahold of you if I need to?"

Melanie took out a card and handed it to him. She'd taken it out of a 'no pocket', and his eyes bugged out again. She smiled. "There're lots of things I learned when Muriel trained me. And if you think I'm tough, ask her to show you the media recording of a day at school. I should get out of here. I've taken enough of your time."

"Just don't be a stranger," he said.

Melanie gathered her squad and translated to the street in front of Muriel's office, and they walked in.

Muriel grinned when she saw her. "So, how bad did he chew you up?"

"He didn't. We swapped war stories. Turns out he was on the last ship I served on. He recognized me by my voice. So, what's up? What did I do wrong."

"Oh, that. Nothing. I thought maybe you needed an excuse to get away from him. Glad it worked out. Besides, I thought your gorillas might be hungry, and we've always got food here. You know that."

Muriel turned to the men. "By the way, I don't know if Melanie told you, but you're welcome to come here any time. And that's been true even before you helped us. If you prefer more adult company, there's always Ted's office, next door. Of course, 'more adult' is relative. He's more adult than I am, but probably not what you'd actually call adult. You guys did good, today. Got in and did what needed to be done, then got out of the way. And the two that gentled those kids, that was great."

"Yea, we checked them out, to be sure they were all right. Then just talked them down and assured them that mommy was going to be alright. That training that Mark gave us kicked in, and I KNEW what you were doing. So I knew that, if you could get to them while they were still alive, then it was a possibility that they'd be able to walk away from it. They get whoever caused the accident?"

"Yea," said Muriel. "It was a runner. Police helicopter was following them and saw them cut off the truck, causing it to jackknife and flip. The guy's an illegal and up on a bunch of charges. He'd hit a convenience store, armed robbery, and ended up shooting someone. When they caught him, he made the mistake of firing on the police. I figure he'll be an old man before he gets out of jail."

A young boy came in and walked over to one of Melanie's squad. "Hi, I'm Bobby. You've got stripes. Did Muriel train you?"

"Hi, Bobby, I'm Jack. No, Muriel didn't train me. Melanie did. You're one of Muriel's friends, aren't you?"

"Yep. You don't mind me calling you by your first name? Most adults do."

"Nope. Tell you a little secret, most adult males are just young kids inside. We just pretend to be adults. And we do that because the women think we should. Another secret, that the women don't like that we know? Most women are just young kids inside, too, and pretend to be adults because they think they have to. So the whole thing is a lie," Jack smiled.

Bobby grinned back. "You're crazy."

"You know? Sometimes I think so. But then I realize that, nope, I'm not crazy. The rest of the world is. And then everything is all right."

Bobby giggled, and Jack chuckled. "You got a gun?" Bobby asked.

"Yep. But I only show it to bad guys. Well, bad people. They aren't all guys."

"OK. That's logical. Guns aren't toys, and they can hurt people. And besides, you don't really know me and how much I can be trusted to be serious about serious things."

"You know," Jack said, "I'm beginning to get the feeling that you're actually an adult pretending to be a kid. That was a pretty serious statement for a kid."

"You know," Bobby said, "Sometimes I get the feeling that adults forget that kids go through some pretty serious stuff. Stuff they just have to put up with, because adults won't tell them what's actually going on. Sometimes adults just outright lie to kids. Not make jokes and kid around, but real lies. But kids aren't stupid. We can figure some of it out. We don't always have the knowledge and experience of adults. Heck, most times we don't. But we learn. Sometimes things that we wish we hadn't. And kids talk to other kids, and find out about other bad things. So we learn from each other and share with each other, because that's all we've got." And he managed to say it all with a grin.

"WOOSH! OK," Jack said, "you forty year old kid, here's how it is. Yes, I have a gun. And it takes time and practice to learn how to shoot and how to keep it safe. And yes, I've shot people, even killed people. And when it's happening things are going on too fast to worry about. You deal with it because they're trying to hurt you or someone you need to protect. But afterward, especially if I've killed someone, it hurts. I don't like having to kill, but it's better that I do than let some bad guy or gal get away and hurt someone else or kill someone else. It's a judgment call. We don't always get it right, but by the time we're in a position like I am, or any of the detail and especially Melanie, we mostly get it right. And there're lines we won't cross, things we won't do. Make sense?"

"Yep," Bobby said. "And that's mostly how it is with us and some of the things we can do. I'm not sure the adults fully realize it, but kids can kill, too. We don't want to. We'd rather not be in the position to need to. But if it happens, well, weakening an artery in the brain so it blows out, or holding a heart so it stops beating. Yea, it can be done. Just a different application of using shields. And it's scary, and we don't want to. So mostly we try to avoid situations like that. And we know that, if we're angry, we've GOT to stop, at least mentally, and work with the situation and not the anger."

"Yea," said Jack. "That's pretty much the way it is. I hadn't thought about the thing with the shields, but you're right. They can be as dangerous as a gun. And it's a lot more personal than using a gun. But you're right. That's serious stuff."

"So now you know why kids kid," Bobby said. "We do it to keep others from thinking that we're seriously serious about something. We do it to bleed off tension and anger, either from ourselves or others. And it's kinda a game, and there're rules that aren't rules. The biggest one is 'don't make it real'. Don't use it to hurt people. So, in here, we're all crazy. We all kid and make fun of ourselves, and sometimes make fun of others, but not in a way to hurt. It's harder to do that, but it can be better, sometimes, too. And we don't pick on sensitive areas of people's thinking about themselves. And we're always ready to say 'I'm sorry', because we all want to be friends. For too long, we were all we had."

"How?" Jack asked, shocked.

"Muriel. Muriel was our mother."

"I WAS NOT!," Muriel said, looking at her abdomen. "I've never been pregnant."

"Alright, our surrogate mother," Bobby said with a grin. "She made us stay together, made us check on each other and help when we could. She kept us organized, and helped us hope. Then she got trained, and she brought hope with her. It's how I found out that I could feel their pain. Mental pain, you understand? And slowly I learned how to help them. When those kids were taken out of the cars I could feel how scared they were. I almost left what I was doing to go to them. But you and the others arrived and helped them. Calmed them down, got their systems stabilized. So, I could go back to work. It told me something. Even if there's something else that calls me, I have to do the job in front of me, first, unless it's an absolute emergency."

"You're in the same business," Bobby added.

"Yea. So, what happens if it gets too much for me? What do I do, then?" Jack asked.

"You talk to people. You have friends. People who care. You have Melanie, and believe me, she knows. You've seen some of what she's gone through just because she's a woman. You look at your choices, your options and talk them over with people whose opinion you respect. Just don't bottle it up. Heck, if you can stand to talk to 'just a kid'," and Bobby made a goofy face. "you can even talk to me. I know you can make a link, or you wouldn't

have the stripes. It may even be that the problem isn't the job or the stress, but something else. Be honest with yourself. Go stand on the square if you have to."

"There's also Envoys," said Mata, quietly. "Either here or at Home. The ones that greet the souls and sooth them can do more than that. And they don't judge. Envoys don't judge. They can't. But they can help you find your balance and maintain it. It's what we do."

"Bobby, how did you know," asked Jack.

"I could feel it. The hard part was getting you to realize that a kid could understand something adult, and opening up enough for me to reach it without invading your mind."

"Um, I think you were actually talking to more than just Jack," another squad member said. "Oh, I'm Grant. I've had the same questions, lately, about whether I'm in the right business. Thanks, Bobby. That helped."

"Likewise. I'm Saul," said a third. "And, if you don't mind, I'd like to take you up on your offer to Jack. I think I'd like to talk to you some more. Find out more about you. Let you find out more about me. If you'll let me."

"No sweat. Pass the word around. I'm easy to talk to. After all, I'm just a kid," Bobby said, grinning, "and what do kids know?"

"They know how to kid," said Muriel, Mata and Melanie together, then laughed.

"OK," said Melanie. "You guys ought to be getting back. Big day tomorrow. Besides, what you did today might be on the news, and you'll want to record it for your friends. If you have any."

Chapter 30

Expect the Unexpected (Thursday)

"Muriel," Sarah, the current active duty squad leader said, "you aren't going to believe this."

"Of course I will. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. So, what is it this time?"

"The reports on the accident? Three channels, three news reports on the rescues? They're all the same," Sarah said. "Or as nearly the same as one can get from three different reporters. They even borrowed feed from each others helicopters. They also all zoomed in on Melanie and her troops holding up their identification. And they all showed the same view of the vehicles being moved to the median by your friends. Not only that," she went on, "but they were all complimentary about Enclave and the Secret Service banding together to help the victims and remove the congestion."

"Well," said Muriel, "I don't know if it's an impossible thing, but it certainly is unusual. Anything on those two officers that Melanie arrested?"

"Just a side note, later on in the newscasts, that two officers have been arrested for attempting to interfere with the rescue operations, and the department is currently in the process of determining how many others are unable to recognize the identification of other agencies."

"Now, THAT'S nice," said Muriel.

"Oh, and someone must have gotten hold of the disk we gave the Commissioner. They, whoever they are, spliced together a coherent video from the separate reports and posted it on the Internet. It's gone viral, and apparently the hits are from all over the world. We're famous," Sarah said, in a disgusted voice.

"That could have its upside, you know," Muriel said. "That is, if it didn't try to paint us black."

"Oh, no. Nothing like that," Sarah responded as Ted walked through the door. "Just that we were saviors."

"I see you've found out about the video on the Internet," Ted said. "I thought the Commissioner's secretary did a pretty good job on that. Cars being opened up, with no one touching them, in order to extract victims. Kids working on injuries and reducing them. Truck flying through the air in a stately move to the median, followed by flying cars. Yep, pretty good."

“Ted,” said Sarah, “did you have a hand in this?”

“Me? How could you think that?”

“Easily,” came back four voices, followed by a bunch of snickers.

“Well, THIS time you're wrong. It was the Commissioner,” he responded. “He felt that, after all the bad press we'd gotten, that it would be nice if we were shown in a positive light. By the way, there's a brief, positive and factual statement in the description for the video, too. Something like, 'In the massive pileup on the interstate, the Envoys from the Embassy Enclave teamed up with a squad of the United States Secret Service to rescue and aid victims'.”

“Well,” said Sarah, “that would explain why there's a reporter and cameraman, and a State Police officer at Reception, requesting permission to come in, and wanting guides to the Ambassadors.”

Ted looked at Muriel. “I think I'll take the media. The officer, I think, is the one looking for training.” They left Muriel's office and waited in front of their WHOOSH doors. Moments later Envoy guides translated the individuals to their respective targets.

“Officer,” Muriel said, smiling, “I thought you were going to wait for your day off to come out.”

“Ma'am, I tried,” he replied with a bit of a drawl. “I honestly tried. But my boss told me to get my butt over here and at least find out what it would take to get the training. What it costs, how long it takes, things like that.”

“Come on in my office.”

And next door, Ted was having his own conversation with the reporter. “It's really quite simple,” he said. “We recently upgraded our training with certain Envoy first-aid techniques, and felt that it was only neighborly to put them to use assisting this fine city that has been so hospitable to us.” And Muriel felt that farmers all over the county would find that they didn't need any more fertilizer because Ted was laying it on so thick. Mata just rolled her eyes.

“If that's diplomacy,” Muriel whispered to Mata, “then I don't want any part of it. Where do I go to resign.” Mata just laughed.

“Come on in and take a seat,” Muriel said to the officer, indicating her casual area. “My name is Muriel and, despite the fact that I look like a twelve year old girl, I am one.” The officer laughed. “Unlike the Envoys you may see that LOOK like twelve-year-olds and aren't. However, there are a bunch more kids wandering around. Accept no substitutes. The ones with stripes on their sleeves are actually human.”

“Ma'am, I'm going to enjoy talking with you, even if we can't come to an understanding

on training. My name is Theodore Morris, but most people just call me Tex. I don't know why – I'm from Illinois.”

“Well, Tex, things are going to be a lot more pleasant between us if you stop calling me 'ma'am'. Just Muriel is enough. It makes things more friendly.”

“OK, Muriel, whatever you say.”

“Now, about the training. It takes one to four days, or thereabouts, depending on the individual. Groups might take a bit longer, but not much. Envoys may be assigned to an individual during training to protect the victim . . . I mean student . . . during training. We provide room and board, clothing, medical while here, and plenty of work and plenty of banter and teasing. How's that sound to you?”

Tex finally managed to stop chuckling long enough to say, “Ma'am . . . Muriel, that sounds fine. My boss was expecting it to take much longer. But you still haven't mentioned the cost of the schooling.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I should have said. Well, Tex, I'm afraid this is going to break your boss's heart. If he has one.” By now, Tex was laughing, outright. “You see, that's the worst part of the training. It'll seem like a bargain, but is actually much higher than anyone would expect. The training and all that string of things I added is . . . free. But, and here's the catch, you'll end up paying for it for the rest of your life. You'll pay for it on duty, when you manage to stop a situation that could be dangerous or deadly. You'll find yourself doing the same off-duty, too. And you'll find yourself finding and training others.”

“Muriel, I do that, now. Even the training part of it, as I'm usually the one that gets the new guys and is expected to show them the ropes.”

“I will warn you, it can mean a lot more work. And a lot more potential danger, if not to you then to those around you. I've only been doing this just shy of two weeks, now. And already I've been shot at with guns and a Rocket Propelled Grenade, and had missiles fired at me. I've been in and out of Home a few times, cleaning up a problem there, and assisted at a traffic accident. Oh, my training took two days, and halfway through it is one of the times that people shot at me.”

“Well, that sounds about like a normal two week period for me. When can I start?”

“Any time you can get four days free,” responded Muriel. “Did you bring your cruiser?”

“Yes'm. Is that a problem?”

“Well,” Muriel said, “It might be a bit of a target. We can bring you in, just like the guide did. Or someone can go with you and bring you back.”

“Wouldn't that be too much trouble? I mean the distance and everything.”

“Tex, the Detail Chief you talked to, Melanie, brought in a squad of five from Washington. And they were in five different locations, at home with their families. Sound like it's too much of a distance or trouble? When she left to go back to Washington, after her training, an Envoy returned her rental car to the rental company by translating it there. If you can pass the first test toward the training, and can give me a clear picture, we can have you back with your boss to explain the situation, then back here in no time.”

“So what's the test?” Tex asked.

“Close your eyes. Think of me as a door that's right in front of you. Pretend your mind has a hand, and knock on the door.” And a moment later the most surprised look came over his face.

“THAT'S how you do it!”

“Yep. So, let's go get your car,” Muriel responded.

::Mata, I'll be out of the office for a bit::

::I heard. Second squad is going with you. Whether you like it or not::

Muriel caught the smile in Mata's mental voice, and sent an image of her sticking her tongue out back.

“We'll have company,” Muriel said. “My Security Chief, Mata, won't let me go anywhere alone. Especially with strange men.” Tex just laughed.

The squad met them at the front gate as they translated from the office. Tex looked at them and said, “This is security?”

“Yep,” said Muriel. “To be precise, this is squad two, and they're all Envoys. They've been with me from the time I was selected. They rotated guarding my parents house between the four squads, so I could meet them all. Then they put me through the ringer the next day in training. I hadn't had that much fun in years. Despite the fact that they LOOK like kids, they aren't. They'd make adults look like infants. I like the shock effect of squads two and three showing up as kids my age.”

“I believe it. You do like to do the unexpected. I can see that. Must drive your poor Security Chief crazy.”

“Naw, she already was. You see, Mata's an Envoy. And before she met me she looked like a middle aged man and was named Matthew – Matt for short.” And Tex roared with laughter.

They found the car, and Muriel translated it and Tex to the parking lot of their substation, under the indulgent supervision of the squad leader. The squad, of course, had translated themselves to an area in front of the car. Tex went to the door and began gathering

up his personal effects when another cruiser came into the parking lot under a high rate of speed and with lights running. It screeched to a halt and the driver's door flew open.

"What are you kids doing here in the parking lot," demanded the driver. Muriel stopped him before he could get any closer.

She turned toward him. "No, don't twitch. You'd only hurt yourself," she said as he made to reach for his gun. She walked casually over to him and looked him over like a military officer examining a recruit that had just messed up. "Roberts, huh. Well, Mister Roberts, I am Ambassador Muriel. I'm sure you've heard of me at one time or another in the past week or so. And if not, I'm sure you will remember me now. Would you care to tell me where the fire is? Or is it a murder?" Her voice was soft, but carried well.

Tex, by that time, had joined her. "Yes, Roberts. Just what was the emergency?"

"Corporal, sir," Roberts said, "there're kids in the parking lot. Obviously up to no good and trying to steal equipment from the cars."

"Roberts," said Tex, "One of those 'kids' has already identified herself. The others are her security squad. And they're with me. Or, I'm with them. Whichever. But you, you're not with anything. You've been warned before about your behavior. You've been given every opportunity to correct that behavior. But I see that you haven't learned. I think it's time we had a little talk with the sergeant. Don't you?"

"Tex," Muriel said, "give me a visual." When she got it, she turned to her squad leader and said, "Bring him." They translated to the sergeant's desk area, carefully grouping themselves in the limited space.

The sergeant looked up, looked around at the assemblage, then looked at Tex, and said, "Herding kids, now, corporal?"

Muriel pulled her Home Passport out of her 'no pocket' at the same time that Tex said, "The Ambassador, sergeant." The sergeant's mouth dropped open, and he looked at Muriel, then looked at the passport.

"Hi, my name is Muriel," she said.

"Madam Ambassador," the sergeant began.

"Oh, please. I'm hardly a Madam, I'm only twelve. Let's just stick to Muriel. Before I begin my spiel, I think Tex would like you to deal with another problem. I'm patient. I'll still be here when that's dealt with."

"OK, Tex, what's going on?"

"Sergeant, unauthorized use of emergency lights, reckless driving, reckless endangerment. He's been warned, repeatedly. And then insulting an Ambassador, and I

don't know what she wants to do about that," Tex said.

"I see. Roberts, your badge and your gun, please. Then change and get your uniform back to supply. Tex is right about your attitude. You're done. We don't need your type here. Muriel? How about his insult. That goes to not only harassment, but possible treaty violation."

"Don't worry about it," Muriel said. "Let him go back to parking cars or making fries. He just isn't worth the trouble. There's no curing stupid."

"Get out of here, Roberts," the sergeant said. "Now then"

"Free," said Muriel.

"Say what?"

"We provide food, shelter, clothing – well, at least a way for them to get clothing – medical, as necessary," Muriel rattled off. "Oh, and of course the training and the loan of an Envoy at least until they are trained to protect themselves. Free. We don't charge for it, because they'll end up paying for it for the rest of their lives by helping others. It takes, I'd say, between one to four days, depending on the person. It took me two. I just trained a Secret Service officer in one. My parents took four, but they didn't complete the final step.

"About groups: the largest we've handled was fifteen at a time, and actually I didn't handle them. Melanie Carter, the Secret Service officer, did. I handled 13 at once. It takes more work, more organization, and four squads to keep things going, but it can be done. One to one is ideal, but when I have an idea of what you want to do and how you want to do it, we can come up with something. Oh, groups might take longer than individuals, again because we can't account for how long individuals in a group are going to take."

"Everything, though, is dependent on one test. Tex passed, or I probably wouldn't be here right now. Not that I'd have refused to come out. I'm not like that. But he'd have had to come back to you to see what you wanted to do. On the other hand, he DID pass, and we have no problem with him training others. We'll even send people to help, monitor, and supervise until a trainer feels comfortable and competent. And either Ted or I can award them their stripes and passports, if you like, though depending on how busy things are, they may have to come to us."

"So, food, clothing, shelter, medical – what else? OH!" she exclaimed. "Whatever they need or want that's made in Home or the Enclave is free, and that's any time they're in either place, not just during training, and they get recognized as Citizens of Home once they've passed the training. I can't think of anything else, right off hand. Any questions, sergeant?"

The sergeant just sat there with his mouth open, looking at her.

"Sergeant? Sergeant, are you OK?" ::On it:: said a squad member, who went around the desk and touched the sergeant's shoulder. ::He's OK, just stunned::

After a second, the sergeant said, "I've been sitting here trying to figure out how I could hide a whopping bill for training just Tex, here, and you tell me that I'm the lucky winner of the state jackpot. And you won't let me call you ma'am or use your title. What are you people?"

"Human, in my case," said Muriel. "I'm not sure what you'd call Ted. The rest are Envoys, from Home. I've seen, directly, how helpful the training is. And indirectly, twice, how beneficial having trained groups can be. But in every case there was danger involved, either for me or for those around me. Often for those I love. It's been a hectic two weeks. We do it because, eventually, the training will spread to most of the population, even the civilians. Children will eventually be trained by their parents, and supervised until they can understand and control it properly, thus bringing the population closer to Envoy capabilities. In return, the Envoys learn more about Humans – what motivates us and drives us, how we manage to be creative – until finally they can become Human. Well, that's the ideal. There's going to be bumps along the way. We know it. Ted and I have been dealing with one or more of those bumps the past two weeks, which is why things were so dangerous and hectic."

"You're people will end up on one of the front lines of those bumps. It's to our benefit, both yours and ours, that we have as many trained people to face those bumps as is possible to get. We're trying to beat Sun Tsu and all the other strategists at their own game. We can't tell where the bumps are going to occur, nor can we plan for a battlefield we can't see. So it's up to us to prepare for what we CAN see and project. Now do you see why we give it away? And why we try to make it pleasant and as attractive as possible? We want people to win. Decent people, who just want to get along with their lives. We want to see an end to some of the diseases that take so many people. We want to see an end to some of the savage practices we see in the world, even in this, my own country. So we give away a little training and trinkets. It costs us nothing but our time. But what we ALL get out of it is so much greater – if we're willing to pay the price."

"Decent people just trying to get along," mused the sergeant. "And some of us are out at the sharp point to give others the chance to do just that. Yea, I can see it. Of course, not all of us are as good as we should be . . ."

"That's called being human. Oh, there's some that go beyond that. Greed, corruption, will to power, wanting to control others. Those are the ones that can't be trained. The first test is to be able to make a mental link with the trainer. Those are the ones that would fail first. There are some in the gray area that can't because they've got unresolved issues. But mostly, there's just people," said Muriel. "Those are the ones we want to reach first, and concentrate on. It helps if they know what the sharp edge is and how fragile human civilization is. Cops, the good ones. Military, the same. Doctors and nurses. The few really good teachers, though I'd never met any until I had a squad that gave me three years worth of education in about a half an hour. Something that needs to be changed: the method of teaching. Today's schools are nothing more than a babysitting service that creates organized mayhem. It's got to stop. But so many things are interlinked that we have to make changes carefully."

"Geez! And I thought my job was tough. You're doing and thinking about all that, and

you're only twelve!" the sergeant said. "Well," he added, seeming to come back into focus a bit and sitting up straighter, "I've got work to do. And so do you. Go, take this artificial Texan out of my hair. You've got your four days. More if you need them. Just let me know."

"Thanks, sarge," said Tex.

Chapter 31

Company's Coming (Thursday afternoon)

When Muriel translated Tex back to Enclave, she first stopped at the Guest Hotel, and got him a room. The room number and a fast look at the room gave her enough information to be able to re-locate it when the need arose. Then she returned to her office, to find a flurry of activity going on.

“What's up, Mata?”

“Oh,” said Mata, “we just had a visit from one of the major businesses that is in the process of collapsing. Not the character that was on the list, but the actual head of the company. He's just discovered that his funding was cut off. When he went to query the man on the list about it, he found that he'd left with all the rest of the funds. We're trying to help Ted track him through financials – credit cards. Ted's crew is going the other way, through passports and reservations, and we're cross-checking him as we go. Even Fred's in on this one, and has helped a lot. He's looked at known associates and their connections, and come up with a list of forgers and traffickers. So, how'd it go with you?”

“We've got Tex. Maybe others, but I think it'll be more like Melanie. We'll train him, then he'll train others. It's kinda like we plant the seeds, and the tree grows by itself,” Muriel said.

“Let Don train him.”

“What?” asked Muriel.

“Let Don train him. You know he's qualified. His Envoy guard will monitor, and he's competent and capable. And Don can always ask for any help he wants. He likes being you're shield tester, but he needs more to do. Well . . . so do they all, but we're working on it.”

“Um, I think I need to talk to Tex about it. Then maybe talk to Don. I don't want things to go wrong,” Muriel said. “Tex”

“I heard. Who's Don?”

“Don is one of my friends from school. He wasn't the most apt pupil I trained. He learned, and I know he's been learning more. He's even helped out on some training. But I really don't know what level he is at.”

“Someone said something about an Envoy as monitor?” Tex asked.

"Yea," Muriel said. "And the Envoys, at least in my squads, can all train, and they all know my methods, including the new ones I used with Melanie. And they know how to be flexible."

"Well," said Tex, "I'm a firm believer in giving trainees a chance under supervision. Not to nit-pick and find fault, but to honestly train and encourage. Sounds like your Envoys are like that. I hate to say it, Muriel, but could your past in school be coloring your judgment? I've had some bad teachers in my time. And I mean really bad. The one thing I found out is that the teacher and trainee have to be able to get along with each other. I'd like to meet him, and see if we can hit it off. If we do, I'd like to give it a shot. I know that he'll be backstopped by someone that can make corrections, and it sounds like he listens. Would you call him in, please?"

"You're right. I can't hold him back if he's ready. And the Envoys will know. And there are parts of the training I can't do personally with you, anyway." And Muriel called Don.

"Hi, I'm Don. What's your name?"

"Tex. Well, actually it's Theodore Morris, but everyone calls me Tex."

"Yea, and you don't know why," said Don.

"How'd you know that?"

"You're leaking a little. I can show you how to fix that so you only let people you want to know the deeper thoughts. Wanna link?" Tex looked puzzled for a second, then reached out with his mind and knocked on the door.

"KEWL! Oh, you already linked to Muriel, that's how you know. Still KEWL. Now, look hard at my mind. Tell me what you see."

"Well . . .," Tex said, "I see, like, a room. And I just came through the door because you let me in. But it's a small room, and I'm only seeing what you let me see."

"Good. Good impression of what it's like. I can work with that. Now, I want you to let me look at you, but I want you to see what I see. You don't have to do anything but relax. This might hurt a little, but I'll sooth that away as fast as I can see it. Muriel, can you help me with that if I don't catch it right away?"

"Sure, Don, if Tex doesn't mind."

"Naw, I don't mind," Tex said.

"OK, then, I'm going to use the same room image that you associate with, but you'll see the differences." Don pushed his visualization to Tex, gently, and Tex started.

"Hurt?" asked Don.

"Huh, no. It's just . . . the walls. Like I can see through them some," said Tex.

"Yep. Good. Now, this is the part that might hurt some. Not because I'm doing it, but because you are. Once we get you a little further trained it won't hurt at all. But that's why I asked Muriel to help. She's good at soothing pain. What I want you to do is think of those walls as being more solid. You can change them to steel, or anything, as long as it's something you can think of as more solid."

Tex's eyes closed, some, in concentration. Muriel felt the beginnings of pain, then felt Don move in and add power to Tex, and the pain eased to nothing. Suddenly, Tex's face cleared.

"Got it. Look again. You, too, Muriel, if you want to."

Don looked, and sent the image back to Tex. "Is this what you're seeing? Like solid steel riveted walls?"

"Yep," said Tex. Took me a minute to push the image on myself. But suddenly it just seemed to be."

"Wow," said Muriel. "I've never seen anything like that."

"Yea, I've been talking with some of the Envoys, and they do it differently and instinctively. So I looked at some of the other kids – with their permission, of course – and realized that humans tend to think of things in images. Especially when it comes to themselves. So we did some experimentation, and found we could change the walls construction, move the walls so someone could see more, or even put in another door for individual people. That's next, then looking at souls. Mata, can I use you as an example?"

"It'd probably be a bad one, but yea, no problem. And I'm recording what you're saying and passing it on. You're going to be as bad as Muriel, you know. They want to know what you're going to do next."

Don laughed. "OK, Tex, here's how it is. You don't have to let everyone into the same room. Some might be a steel box. Some might be wood with a door in it. Some might be a room with windows – they can see but not touch sort of thing. And you can designate it according to who it is."

"Oh. OH! I get it. Just a minute. Can I erase the room I've got?"

"You can, but you don't have to. You can always just walk out of it yourself, and create another room. Or even a hall with lots of rooms."

"Dang! That makes sense. OK, what I'm going to do is create another room, with windows. But there'll be another room around it with wood walls. That'll let you in where we can communicate and maybe leak some stuff across, but won't be accessible to others. OK.

I'm going to ask you to pull out. I've still got the link to you, and I'll give you a key. So, when you try to link, use the key."

"Good. Got it. Hold on, now. There. WOW!, now that's different. OK, I need to talk to Muriel for a second."

::Muriel, I want to change the order. Not permanently, but he needs the power and the shield now.::

::You see something?:: she asked.

::Yes, but I can't define it.::

::Then go for it, Don. I trust you.::

::Thanks, boss. Oh and I need the shields of everyone in the building on him, now. And aimed inside as well as outside. Double shields. I just hope we can hold it.::

::???:: she sent.

::Please, Muriel, trust me. You'll understand why in a minute. Just do it, then let me in and don't let ANYTHING out until I contact you and you're sure it's me.::

::Everybody! Emergency shields on Tex, Inside and outside. Now.::

Don waited a moment, then walked through the shields to the room. ::It's OK now. You're covered, and will stay covered until you can protect yourself. I asked Muriel to let me change the order of the training for this. I'm going to show you how to find your power. Then I'm going to show you how to build a shield. I won't be able to test it the normal way, but I'm going to show you how to overpower it. Then I'm going to show you something else. Ready?::

::Yea, I guess so. You've been right, so far. But I'll want an explanation when we're done with this.::

::You got it, man. You'll get your explanation.::

Then they were quiet for about 5 minutes. Everyone was gathered around Muriel's office, focused on Tex. Even the door was locked, something that it normally never was.

Finally, Don sent to Muriel, ::OK, you can check me. I'm wide open. Dig in and find the things you know about me that no one else does. That should confirm that I'm me.::

Again, silence for a couple of minutes. Then Muriel sent, ::OK, you're you. Want out now?::

::Yes, it's necessary. It would kill me to stay. I've shown him how to do it. I've just got

to trust and believe that I told him enough that he can do it:: And Don came out and said, "OK Tex. Now, it's up to you."

Suddenly the room seemed to explode with a light that wasn't there. Tex shuddered, then seemed to collapse. Don called Mark, immediately, and briefed him on what happened in a one second burst as he arrived.

"OK, shock, atypical. And, WHEW, the power that he hit. You people might want to check your computers when we're done. It might have affected them. Everything seems to be alright, he just doesn't want to come out of it. And my gosh! How many shields did you put on him? It's like an isolation ward!"

"In a minute, Mark. People, it's safe, but I want you to keep your shields up for a couple of minutes more. I'm going back in."

::Tex. Tex, it's alright. It's Don. I'm your friend, Don. I'm here for you, man. Come on, come on back to me. I need you. We need you. You did good, man. And we've got a doctor here to make sure you're alright, but I can already tell. You did it just right. And I know you protected yourself, because I can feel you. Come on, Tex. Come on back to me . . . ::

Tex's eyes fluttered, then opened, and he took a deep breath and sighed. "Thanks Don. But how'd you know?"

"I talked to the Envoys," Don said. "They said something like this could happen, but it was extremely rare. And they showed me how to fix it. We all thought it was simply a theoretical thing to keep 'the kid' occupied. When I went in that second room, I had hints that that's what happened, and why. And a couple of seconds later I was pretty sure I was right. Sure enough that I was willing to risk my life to go back in and show you how to fix it yourself. And you were the only one that could have."

"By the way, to give you an idea of how rare, the last time was centuries ago. And the guy didn't make it. Nor did the person trying to help him. And it was never made public. Only the Envoys knew about it. It's over, now. I'll tell people part of it. It's up to you to tell them the rest, if you want to."

"No. No, I think I should tell them. You can amplify if you want. But I should tell them. Oh, and Muriel, I've got my trainer. I understand why, if we'd done it your way, it would have been a disaster." Tex paused and gathered himself. "It was years ago. I was about ten. I had always been sensitive to other people. Something grabbed me by that sensitivity and got inside me. In my mind. It's been waiting ever since. Whatever it was, it hated Envoys and blamed them for something. Don's sensitive to the same type of things, and felt it even in in the steel room. In fact, that's why he suggested I build it, then let him out after seeing it and locking the door."

"And that's why he suggested the two part room, or room within a room. He was able to talk to me, there, teach me how to find power and build shields. Then he told me how to strengthen them so they'd hold a nuclear bomb from the inside, and how to place myself

outside the shield. The inside-out-shield I put around the steel room, and welded the door shut. Then I built the strongest shield I could imagine, but to reflect back into the room, around myself. Don told me what the Envoys had said about coaxing the thing into the room. It could get in, but couldn't get out, or not immediately. I had to act fast, then, and build a special type of light bomb inside the room. My shields, my work. He couldn't do it. Then set it off. It killed the thing, and a portion of the radiation leaked out into the room. That's what you saw. It's gone. Whatever it was, it's gone, and can't get back, now, because I'm shielded."

"That's why I had to have power and shields before anything. If I'd tried to see souls it could have come out and found another host. It would have killed me in the process, and probably Don. Scariest thing I've ever done, and I've been in some scary situations. It had to be worse for Don. He knew he was risking dying by going back in to help me. And he stuck by me and taught me, and got out. But that's why Muriel had to check him before he came out. If he'd been infected, I, and therefore he, would have had to be killed. Soul death. The Envoys would have recognized it and acted. The only time, I understand, that the Envoys would have killed. It wasn't an Envoy. It wasn't from any dimension the Envoys know."

"Muriel," Tex said, "I hope you don't mind, but I'd like Don to continue my training. He knows what buttons to push to get me through this. Oh, you could probably do it, since you taught him. But, well, after that I think he's something of a special friend."

"Granted," said Muriel, with no hesitation. "And I agree. That was an impressive piece of work and very fast action. And a unique way of performing your job, Don, of testing shields." And the tension broke in nervous laughter.

"You can all relax your shields, now. He's safe. Or as safe as any Human can get," Don said. The shields started coming down. It was a process of some minutes, because people had simply layered on whatever was already there, in no particular order and fast. So untangling them and sorting out whose was whose took a little time. Finally, the shields were down, and the door unlocked, and Ted blasted through them.

"What the heck is going on here? The doors were locked, nobody was working, and there were so many shields on the place that I thought you'd suffocate."

"We had an incident, Ted," said Muriel, and sent him a burst that showed him what had happened. "Don cleared it."

"Don did?" Ted said when he'd absorbed the burst. Then he collapsed in one of the casual seating. Mark went to him, immediately.

"OK, too much of a shock. He's coming back. Muriel, this time I'll have to admit that you didn't do it. I was a witness. You just always happen to be where they happen," he said, and smiled.

"Don . . .," Ted said, sounding old and tired, "do you have any idea what that thing was?"

"Nope. The Envoys don't either. Only what it does. It isn't native to earth or Home. It's from another dimension. It eats souls. But it's picky. A little gray, and it won't touch it. It ate Envoys. Millions of them before they evicted it from Home. So it came here. It could get enough off of humans to stay alive, but only barely. It's the reason that the trip to Home was a one-way trip, one that Humans couldn't normally take. They had a shield up around Home to block anything that wasn't just soul coming from earth. You found the way to bypass that shield, and it made them nervous. But you'd thrown out the thing that had captured and enslaved them for so long, so they gave you a chance. Besides, you were so obviously gray that the thing wouldn't have attached to you."

"So, how did you capture it?" Ted asked.

"Simple," Don said. "That steel room. I went in and used the sort of masking that the 'judge' used, but made myself look dazzling white. It came in the room, and I switched to shiny black. But it couldn't get out of the room. I had to scoot in a hurry, though. It was desperate and was bouncing all around. Tex's shields held. I went through them, the only thing that COULD go through them. Then Tex built the light bomb – I'm guessing here, based on what happened – it's a special type of shield the Envoys had developed, and he passed that through into the room. I told him that once it was in to build another reflective shield around himself, and make it as strong as he could. Over-power it. Then set off the bomb. And contact me as soon as the thing appeared to be gone."

"I didn't have to go in as fully to find out. It had wiped all traces of the thing out. So, now it's gone. Oh, and just for your information, Ted, the shields you put up around Home and Earth are reflective. And they keep such things out. Also, the way you constructed them in Home would have pushed anything like it out. You didn't do earth the same way because you were afraid of disturbing the balance between body and soul in humans."

"And you figured all this out?" Muriel asked.

"Well, me and about a dozen Envoys playing thought games. I'd asked them what the worst possible situation would be, and one of them told me about the thing. So we used that, and what information they had about it, to test possible scenarios. Now you see why I wanted all those shields. We couldn't let it out. Especially with all the Envoys here. It had to go. The most dangerous point for me was when I played 'here little fishy'. If I was wrong, then Muriel would have sensed the difference in me, and the Envoys would have struck. They probably wouldn't have been successful, but they would have had to try. Too much was at stake. Tex had the hardest part. He had to believe he could do it, with no practice and not being sure of his shielding. And by that time he knew what was at stake and that it could kill him trying to kill it."

"I didn't explain it all to him. Tex, I'm sorry, I kinda used you in that respect."

"Man," said Tex, "If you had I wouldn't have been able to do it. No, you did right. You let me know my options, you let me know the dangers, both to me and to everyone else. And you let me make the decision. So, it was my decision to try. You also let me know what

would happen if I failed. It had to be killed, even if killing it killed me. My decision, man. I knew that the risks were. I chose. Sometimes I have to act like an adult,” he added, grinning. “I’d be pleased if you’d be the one to continue training me. Only not just yet. I’m tired.”

“Yea, I know. I’m not thinking too straight, right now, either,” Don said.

“Well, it’s a good thing somebody is, then,” Mata said. “Don, do you remember his room number, at least?”

“Um . . . no.”

Mata went unfocused for a minute, then snapped back and said, “OK, I’ve got your room number and a visual to be able to translate you there, Tex. I’m also putting a squad on you for protection. They’ll take care of you like you were their own long lost brother. Anything you want, anything you need, they’ll take care of it. If we need to, we’ll call your boss and tell him you’re going to be late getting back. But I’m betting that, after a good supper and sleep, you’ll be fine and able to continue, tomorrow. Just one thing, don’t take the squad too seriously. They’ve been known to kid with people. Nothing malicious or hurtful. But they act more like kids than Don and his yayhoos do. But they do do good work, and they WILL protect you. That’s what Envoys do is protect.”

“Don,” Mata continued, “do I need to call your parents and ask them if you can stay overnight? Just tell them that you got overtired doing a job for us, and we’d be pleased to provide supper and a good place to stay, and any entertainment you want – um . . . that’s appropriate to your age, that is. You’re already growing up too fast.” And she grinned.

“Yea, Mata, I’d appreciate it. I sure wouldn’t get much rest at home, tonight.”

Chapter 32

Growing Pains (Friday morning)

“OK,” Mata said. “They're both tucked up in their suites, having dinner. I don't imagine they'll be wandering around, much, tonight. They'll probably watch a little TV then crash. Tex has a squad with him. I was going to create a new squad, but your forth squad said 'no'. They're you're trainers, and they all look adult. In fact, the 'women' switched to 'men' so he wouldn't feel uncomfortable. And he doesn't. They've been kidding with him and acting like friends, and he's accepted them as such. They're taking care of all the things he might need, ordering dinner from one of the restaurants and such. They'll probably help with training him to make his own clothes, tomorrow, too.”

“Don is in better shape,” Mata went on. “His Envoy is with him, of course, and a bunch from the Guest House converged on him to get him whatever he needs or wants. Then they ignored him unless he speaks to them. No, it's not cruel. They're talking with his Envoy, kidding and stuff, like they were long lost friends. And, believe it or not, it's what he needs. He needs the company around him, where he can interact when he wants to, but not directly hovering over him. There's a program on TV that he wants to watch, but I'm not sure he's going to make it. If he doesn't, then the chair he's in fully reclines and conforms to him, and the Envoys will just leave him there and cover him with a blanket.”

“Now for the good news,” Mata said. “Ted found the people that made that company runner's forged documents, and has the names he's traveling under. He also found the account that's feeding his false credit cards, and put a stop payment on them. Not strictly legal, but it's stranded him in one country unable to get funds or use any of his documents. He's got a squad going to pick him up, now. And no, he's not turning him over to the CEO or anyone from the company. Nor is he turning over the money. Since they don't know how much the runner has, Ted's going to keep quiet about it. The guy was skimming for quite a while, and it's a tidy sum. He's going to use it as part of the money to purchase the company. It won't happen overnight. They've got to call back in all the stock, first. He is NOT going to feed Wall Street sharks. He figures that they are actually the ones that caused the companies to be ruined with their insistence on the bottom line.”

“In all,” said Mata, “I think we've got that crisis solved. We have a few more companies to go, then we'll have locked up some key areas of business and technology. All through shell companies with no apparent connection to us. By the time the government finds out that Home owns the companies it'll be too late to do anything about it. They might even be showing a profit by then, without the dirty tricks that they've been using. Management will go, of course, and maybe accounting. We'll put in Envoys from Home that are training for the positions.”

“So, you can go to bed with a clear conscience. You can even eat dinner, which you've only been playing with. You can even watch movies or TV programs, if you like. I might not

even notice what ones you're watching, but don't count on it." The warm, knowing smile that Mata gave her took the sting out of it. She'd been caught a couple of times trying to access movies that were beyond her age range. Mata didn't judge. But she also didn't allow her to run wild. And she managed to walk that thin line with gentle good humor, knowing that kids are curious, naturally, but holding that curiosity to what was appropriate to her age.

"Girl, you did good, today. And so did Don and Tex. That was something that we just didn't see coming at all, yet we handled it. Don handled it," Mata said.

"I know. It's humbling to think of Don, that I always had to coax and protect suddenly showing that he didn't need the protection from me, anymore. And that he was beyond my coaxing. Now I know how my dad felt. Oh, I'm not going to hold him back. It's just hard to get my head around, you know?"

"Yea, and it's going to happen with all of them. And they're all about the same age, so you're going to get clobbered with a bunch of them at once. Can you handle it?" Mata asked.

"I guess I'll have to. At least I've had some warning, and they aren't all coming at me at once," Muriel said.

"You're growing up, kid. Way too early, but you're doing it, anyway."

Muriel said, "You remember when Bobby said I was their mother? Now I think I know what he meant. I think I need some time to think, Mata."

"No sweat. You know how to reach us if you need us." And Mata disappeared.

Friday morning found Muriel in a much better mood. Shower and necessities, and breakfast went fast and in good humor with female members of her squads bouncing around and chattering cheerfully.

Downstairs, news of Don and Tex were very encouraging. Tex had managed to get the complicated uniform he wore, with badge, name plate, garrison belt and all the things attached to it, and COMFORTABLE shoes that looked normal and would always stay polished, all on the third try. Then in and out of that and casual clothes. They'd been up early. Tex asked if he could also wear the Enclave uniform, and Ted had said that he didn't see a reason why he couldn't learn it, but that he probably would only wear it when he was at Enclave. Ted couldn't see any other time when it would be appropriate. So, then he learned that.

Then he modified it, adding a gray garrison belt, and handcuff case and holster in gray. He'd opted to not put a gun in a 'no pocket' as it was part of the image of a State Police officer. He also added his badge and name plate, and GRAY polished boots under his pants. And a hat. Round, forward sloped flat top and with rigid sides and a bill at the front, it looked to be of gray leather, polished as high as the boots. The end result was a science fiction version of a uniform, and very intimidating. He just grinned when asked why, and said, "I've got an idea." At the time that Muriel came downstairs, he was already bouncing from his

room to Don's room, and to Ted's old office which was still empty. Muriel had a hunch that he'd get all five stripes at one time – the first one to do that other than Ted. And, in fact, Ted had only gotten four at once, the fifth one being applied when Muriel's was.

Speaking of Ted, he arrived at Muriel's office shortly after she did. "Tex is in Home. Should be back, soon," he said.

"Here to give him his stripes?" asked Muriel.

"Well, actually I thought Don should do it. He put a lot of work into this and really out-did himself. Out-did us, too. He deserves the opportunity. Do you know how to do those 'hidden' stripes?"

"Sure do. Melanie made sure I did. Then I never used it. But the 'teachers' made a dump of it. I can give that to Don when he gets back," said Muriel.

"They aren't back yet?" asked Mata. "They've been gone about ten minutes. It only takes a couple to go up and back."

"He may have met someone," said Muriel. "Remember me? I met Lotta on my trip. His Envoy hasn't returned hollering for help. I wouldn't worry."

As she finished talking two people suddenly appeared in front of her office door. One in gray and one in dark blue. Both were laughing and goofing as they entered. "We're back!" Don called. Full pass, no sweat. Sorry we took so long on the last trip, but some of the Envoys that comfort the newly dead converged on both of us to congratulate us on yesterday's event."

"Don," Muriel said in her best 'mock serious' voice, "can I see you a minute?" She took him aside, and told him that he'd be applying the stripes, if Tex wanted them. His eyes lit up like there was a bright light behind them, and he stood taller. Then Muriel gave him the dump of how to do it. He paused, letting it settle into place, then took a look at it.

"Seems simple enough. Just that extra twist compared to what you did with us. Yea, I can do it. I'll ask him," Don said. He went back to Tex and mentally asked him. Some questioning seemed to go back and forth, but in the end Tex agreed.

"Put your arms up," Don said. "Dang, I've always wanted to say that to a cop." and they both laughed, but Tex put them up where he could see them. Four stripes immediately appeared on his cuffs. "Got a gem in mind for the fifth?" Don asked.

"Well," he drawled, "much as I like the way those pretty colored stripes look on you people, I thought something a little more subdued might be better for me. I thought of two, and I'd like to see what you think. One is called 'Tiger's Eye'."

"I know that one," said Ted. Pretty stone, and looks almost three dimensional when it's cut right. What was the other?"

"Well, the other one is pyrite. Looks like silver with sparkles in it," Tex said.

"Yep, like a fancier version of the silver stripes. So which did you decide?" asked Ted.

"Well, that kinda depends on whether or not I can get your permission to use something. When I practiced making the uniform I kinda changed it just a bit," Tex said, grinning."

"Oh, oh," said Ted. "Maybe I'd better see what you did."

"Oh, nothing too much. But I was thinking about if I end up training anyone else, and how we could be distinguished in an emergency from a common State Police officer. So," he said, and switched.

"WHOA!" Muriel said, as Ted said "WOW!", and Don just cracked up.

"I toldja," he said. "I toldja that they'd flip."

Ted walked over to Tex and looked him over, walking around him for a moment, then asked, "Where's your radio?"

"Couldn't see a way to attach the mic."

"Epaulettes," Ted said, mimicking Tex's uniform, but without the extra accessories. "Like this. I'd also make a suggestion about the belt. Just as secure, but might look better." And changed the belt on his to one that didn't have a plain buckle, but rather a flat panel that hooked onto the other end securely, but had no tag end past the buckle. "This is modeled after the ones worn with kilts, but is narrower, to fit the accessories. You can even put an emblem on the front like this," and the Home emblem appeared on his. "Look mine over and see what you think."

Tex did just that. He looked at the epaulettes, made a couple of minor changes and added them. His radio was suddenly mounted on the side-back of the belt, behind his left arm, and the mic was attached to the epaulette. "Just can't seem to get how that emblem is made, though. I can use the State Police emblem, if they let me."

"I'll show you a picture of one, in a minute. You'd have to come back here to get it, but it only takes a minute. There's a reason for that. That emblem indicates that the person is an authorized Citizen of Home and acting on their behalf. In the mean time, stick to plain until you've had a chance to get clearance for one or the other," Ted said. "That's if they'll let you use the uniform at all. Here, no problem. In fact, we can actually use both emblems, and you can switch them just like switching clothes."

"I'll go with that. Then there, I can use the State Police emblem, and here I can use the Home emblem."

"Well, in that case, since in at least one form it would be going on the gray uniform, I'd go with the 'Tiger's Eye'. It'd show up better. And it would still look good on the blue. Did Don explain that the stripes would only be seen by Envoys and those with Envoy training unless you willed others to see them?"

"Yep. But if I'm in grays I'd let anyone see them," said Tex.

"So, go back to your blues, and we'll give you the rest," Ted said. Tex switched and put up his arms, grinning at Don about the joke he'd pulled. And Don applied the 'Tiger's Eye' braided stripe to the uniform. "Now, I understand you know what a 'no pocket' is. In yours is a little booklet. Pull it out and take a look."

Tex did, and goggled at the green Home Passport. "That might get changed to diplomatic status, if you ever need it for that. There's a certificate inside declaring you a Citizen of Home. And you can go back any time, if no one told you."

"Oh, wow. I wasn't expecting this," Tex said.

"Just another perk. Oh, and the stripes? We puzzled over this a while, but I think we came up with a solution. If you're not wearing long sleeves, they'll look like a form-fit bracelet. Any Envoy will see them, no matter what. Civilians, only if you let them, and you can choose who and how many and for how long."

"Then what I need to do," said Tex, "Is get back to my sergeant and see what he'll accept. Someone want to go with me?"

"I do," Don said. "You lead, and I'll parallel, like we did on initial translations. Oh, my Envoy would probably go with me."

"Dang straight I will," he said. "You aren't going anywhere, buddy boy, without me with you. And I even suspect that I should be following you to the bathroom." This brought a chuckle from a number of those in the office.

"So, let's go," said Tex.

They came out in front of the sergeant's desk, Tex wearing his regular uniform. The sergeant looked up and said, "Still herding kids, Tex?"

"Naw, he just figured that, since he trained me he should have the right to see what I have to put up with," Tex replied.

"I thought it would be that girl, the Ambassador."

"Well, she was busy, and Don volunteered. He's one of her friends. As it turned out, he may have done a better job than she would have, not disparaging her, of course," said Tex.

"So, how far have you gotten through the training?"

Tex just held up an arm, and caused the stripes to show, and the sergeant's eyes bugged out. "That quick? They give you that 'battlefield first aid', too?" the sergeant asked.

"Yep, as soon as I got back, Don transferred it to me. Take a while for it to settle, he said, but I should be good to go in a day or so. Otherwise, I'm just an officer plus. I had a question to ask you, though. Are you wanting any more officers trained?"

"As many as we can get," the sergeant said.

"And how do we distinguish between regular officers and Envoy trained ones in an emergency?" asked Tex.

"I suspect you have some crazy idea you're about to lay on me."

Tex didn't answer. He just switched to the grays.

The sergeant came out from around his desk and looked him over. "Well designed," he said. "How are you going to keep them clean?"

"Self-cleaning. Also self-ironing and self-polishing, as applicable. Either the State Police emblem can be put on the buckle, or the Home emblem," said Tex.

"What's the Home Emblem look like?"

Tex pulled his Home Passport out of his 'no pocket' and handed it to the sergeant. The sergeant looked at the cover and ran his thumb over the emblem. "You might be interested in the certificate inside," Tex said.

The sergeant opened it up, looked at the certificate, then up at Tex and said, "You've been to this place? Home?"

"Yep. There and back, under my own power. I was paralleled in case I ran into trouble, but I did my own translating. I had to do it under my own power both ways to earn my fourth stripe. That says that, for doing it, I'm a Citizen of Home. That means I have dual citizenship, which means a lot to me and is meaningless otherwise. It's a nice little memento, though. Good for impressing the ladies in a bar after work."

"You don't drink, and it's not your style to use cheap tricks. So, what's Home like?" asked the sergeant.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. You'll find out, sometime, even if you never take the training. Everybody goes home."

The sergeant shivered. "I'll take your word for it, then," he said, realizing that Tex was referring to dying. "OK, I'll have to pass the new uniform on up the line for approval. We'll get back to you with any changes we might think are necessary. How hard would it be to make

changes.”

“Not hard. Tell you what,” Tex said, “I’ll go ask Ted if I can have three versions of the belt buckle. Plain, State Police emblem and Home emblem. That way I’d be covered whatever is decided. I can always wear this when I’m there. Come on, Don,” he said. “Time to go and let the sergeant get back to looking like he has work to do.” Tex grinned, and they disappeared.

They translated back to Muriel’s office and told Ted and Muriel what they’d discovered. “I’m not surprised,” said Ted. “But I might be able to short circuit the process. Do you expect that there would be many more that you would train?”

“Me, train?” Tex asked with amazement.

“We covered this before. We’ll help, and we’ll monitor until you feel comfortable with the process. Don and Melanie proved to us that those that are trained can be trainers. Whether that’s always true, we don’t know, which is why we supply monitors. But if you’ve got very many that can be trained I can see the need for the uniform differences. I can also see you as the possible leader of them. Something distinctive could be an advantage. I’ll ‘suggest’ the idea at the top of the food chain, and let it filter down like the byproduct of such food.”

Tex chuckled. “Now that was politely said for a much shorter way of saying it. I suppose because there are so many innocent ears around that don’t need to hear such language.”

“What innocent? Where?” asked Muriel. “My friends and I probably know more bad language than you’ve even imagined. You’d be surprised what kids come up with. But we’re taught to be polite and not shock innocent adult ears.” And everybody laughed, because it was true.

“So, what’s up, now?” asked Tex.

“Relax, see the sights, ask questions. At least a day, more if you need it for that package to settle in. Don can show you around, if you can trust the little imp. Or, there are honest Envoys that would be happy to show you. Just not Mata and a couple of others. They don’t qualify.”

“I HEARD THAT!” came Mata’s voice from the kitchen, at the other end of the building. And again, everybody laughed.

Chapter 33

Growing Pains – Sometimes Caused by Brick Walls (Friday afternoon)

::Incoming,:: sent Mata. ::Some politician demanding to see you.::

::Hoo, boy. I can guess what this is about,:: Muriel sent back. ::I take it that Reception is bringing him the long way. When he gets here, be the officious Administrative Assistant and stall him with questions. Try to make it a good ten or fifteen minutes. Then bring him in and seat him, but don't disturb me. I'll be 'busy'. Oh, and if you could give me a file on him, that would be appreciated.::

Mata chuckled. ::What will you actually be 'busy' doing, if I may ask?::

Muriel grinned back. ::Why, doing Ambassador stuff. You know, staring off into space, talking to Ted, Tex and Don as they go to lunch, and you KNOW how mental talking shows up. The upshot is that I want him warm and nicely browned before I stick a fork in him,:: she said, and giggled.

That was too much for Mata, who outright laughed. It was, perhaps, not the best of times for her to have laughed. Through the door came the politician. And, like most self-important people, immediately thought that she was laughing at him.

Muriel, who had seen the affront on the man's face, immediately asked Ted if she could borrow Tex and Don. Particularly Tex, in grays. Not immediately, but when she had managed to talk sweetly to a jerk and get him angry enough to do something stupid, like threaten her. She intended to pull out all the stops on the guy. Ted just laughed and said they'd ALL be there. He didn't want to miss a good knock-down drag-out fight.

At the same time, Mata sent and said, "I'll get right on it, Ambassador," which let Muriel know that she was talking for the politician's benefit. The politician, by this time, had decided to 'ignore' the presence of a mere underling, and tried to enter Muriel's office. There was no sticky stuff on the shield that he walked into. He, therefore, managed to bruise both his dignity and his nose. It was something like walking into a brick wall, but without the attractive textured appearance of brick.

"May I help you?" Mata asked.

"Not that it's any of your business, little girl, but I'm here to see the Ambassador," he replied.

"Ah, I see what the problem is," Mata said, quietly. "Perhaps I can correct your misapprehensions. My name is Mata. And, despite my appearance, I am an Envoy and happen to be the Ambassador's Personal Secretary, Administrative Assistant, and Security

Chief. And no one gets in to see the Ambassador without first being cleared by me. Oh, and I also happen to be older than you. MUCH older. Envoys have the ability to choose how they appear, and it pleases me to look this way as a favor to the Ambassador. Now that we've cleared that up, let's start with who you are, and why you are here."

"Very well, then. I am Senator Ruggles, and you may announce me to the 'Ambassador'. My business is with her, not with you, little girl," he said, stiffly.

"Hmm. Senator Donald Ruggles, representative of a number of large business that appear to be headed toward bankruptcy, while ignoring the constituents of the Great State of Missouri. The Senator known as 'Don' because of the way he treats people like some bad movie mob boss. The Senator that heads the Finance Committee, has made a fortune on insider trading, and is here wanting to know where his check is. Oh, pardon me, his 'campaign contribution' is. Mr. Ruggles, I believe you have the wrong office. You need to see whatever business was paying you for the laws you were sponsoring."

"Who the heck do you think sent me here," he thundered. "Now, I demand to see the Ambassador. I know very well that she's not busy. I can see her just staring off at the wall. And as for you, little girl, I'll see that you're never allowed to mimic an adult, again. Where's your mother!"

::I do believe it's time for me to turn the heat up, a bit:: Mata sent to Muriel. ::He keeps insisting that I'm a little girl::

::Mata,:: Muriel warned, ::don't do it. Oh, you can grow up and older and play the ice queen. You can even go male and thunder at him. I wouldn't even be adverse to your letting your eyes flash a bit. But you KNOW how hard it is to chase down all those feathers, and how they get in the upholstery:: It was very hard for Mata to keep from laughing at the reference to wings.

Mata stood up. Then she 'stood up' again, growing into a very regal and cold woman. And THEN she changed to a man, even taller. Much taller than the Senator, and with flashing eyes and a voice that rolled out of the depths.

"Mister Ruggles. Here you have exactly no rank to pull, no influence to wave about, and no rights but what we give you. This is an Embassy. The Embassy of a friendly, and I stress that word, friendly foreign nation. You have attempted to insult me, which is difficult without knowing me, and anger me, which you have succeeded in doing with your pomposity. I have no doubt but that you would attempt the same bullying tactics toward the Ambassador that you've attempted with me." Mata, now Matthew, leaned forward and placed his knuckles on his/her desk. "Now, let me make myself clear. We do NOT give out money to politicians to buy legislation. If that's your purpose here, then I suggest you leave now. The Ambassador would be much less inclined to be as gentle as I'm being." Matthew then returned to being Mata and sat down, completely ignoring the Senator while assembling the file that Muriel wanted on the goniff.

::Muriel,:: Mata sent. ::I'm about to do something very bad, and I hope you forgive

me.::

::Oh, no! Not the 'Madam Ambassador' thing. Please. Just Muriel. You've done a fine job of heating and basting him. Don't ruin it with that. Just Muriel, and let him face another 'young lady'. It's my turn to go god-mode. I haven't had a chance to do that in at least a day. Besides, I've got Tex coming back in grays to either escort him out or arrest him for some spurious 'treaty violation'."

::Yes, give her her chance, Mata. The media's just gotten wind of the Senator's presence, and is being translated in from the front gate,:: Ted interjected. ::We should be able to clip his wings . . . oh, sorry Mata . . . shoot him down in such a way that the whole country knows that he was trying to feather his nest. Oh, dear. I'm afraid I made another inadvertent foul reference.::

::If you too don't stop, you'll have me laughing again. And you KNOW how that upsets his delicate sensibilities,:: Mata said.

While this was going on, members of the press appeared outside Muriel's office doors, to be stopped by her friend Don and cautioned to record from outside, and not to ask questions. He assured them that they would be able to hear the proceedings inside, but were NOT to ask questions. Just record, and save any reporting until after the events had happened. He assured them that they wouldn't suffer for it, and would, in fact, get a much better, much bigger story by keeping silent.

"Come with me," Mata said to the Senator. "Sit down and remain silent until addressed. The Ambassador is busy at the moment. I know it doesn't look it, but our methods of communication are not the same as yours. She's currently in communication with three high ranking officials, one of them Ambassador Ted. Disturb her, and we'll have you evicted, and perhaps arrested. Do you understand?"

"This is outrageous. She is clearly staring off in space and not doing anything."

"Mr. Ruggles, either you learn to abide by rules, or you will not see the Ambassador. We can't have some mere politician disturbing Ambassador Muriel, who happens to be the co-leader of a foreign nation. Now, will you obey? Or will you leave."

"Humph! Take me in there, you insufferable brat. NOW! I don't know what kind of tricks you've been pulling, but you will be reported!"

Mata indicated a chair for the Senator, then said, "Muriel, Mr. Ruggles, Senator for Missouri," though she pronounced it 'misery'. She placed the folder on Muriel's desk, turned back to the Senator and said, "Good luck. I don't think she's in the most pleasant of moods. Certain recent events have left her a bit perturbed, and she tends to get testy in the presence of bullies. She's been known to act out on occasion."

Muriel continued to stare at the wall for some minutes, actually trading jibes with Ted and Don, while letting the Senator stew a bit. Then she turned and picked up the folder, and

the Senator jolted. Seen from the back, from Mata's office, and then from the side when he was seated, he hadn't realized that he'd be facing another young girl. He began to think that he was being made fun of. And, of course, he made another grave error. He started to talk. And not just talk but bluster and demand.

Before he could get a word out Muriel quietly said, "Be still." She continued to read the blank page in the folder for a moment, then closed it and set it down.

"Mr. Ruggles. My name is Muriel," she said softly. "If you noticed the sign on my window, then you know that I am an Ambassador. In fact, I am an Ambassador two ways. One, for the People known as Envoys of Home to the People of the United States of America. The second is for the People of the United States to the Envoys of Home. I have documents both ways. I also happen to be a citizen of the United States AND a Citizen of Home. And the only way to become a Citizen of Home is to get there under one's own power and bodily. And get back again, still alive. I did. It's how I earned my fourth stripe."

"Now, I understand that you tried to insult my Security Chief. By doing so you were also attempting to insult my judgment in accepting her to the position. Perhaps I should tell you a little story."

"When I first met Ted I thought he was a substitute teacher about to rake me over the coals for my bad grade on a test. It turns out that he had other plans. So he hollered to a friend of his, an Envoy by the name of Matthew, to see if there was an Envoy that would be willing to appear as a twelve year old girl to train me. Matthew took the job, himself, and there began all his trials and tribulations. Starting with his name. He bungled it. When he/she introduced herself, he said, 'Hi, my name is Matt . . . uh.' I knew something was up, but ran with it. So, Matt . . . uh became Mata. And she started the training. Then realized that, until I reached a certain level of training and competence I would need to be protected. So she became my Security Chief and arranged four squads to protect me."

"Sure enough, half-way through the training, but fortunately after I was able to protect myself, someone tried to kill me. And they kept trying, even after I was made a full Ambassador. Now, that sort of thing tends to leave a mark on an impressionable young mind. And the impression it left on mine was that I would never again be bullied, never again knuckle under to intimidation by people attempting to rest on their 'authority' or pomposity."

"You," Muriel said, "are here to demand money. Money you think you are due because you were always getting it. You've come to the wrong office. We don't take bribes, and we certainly don't hand them out. The money you're looking for came from a business, to buy your voting on legislation. That's a very poor reason to vote on something. That business has recently come on hard times. The funds they were getting to influence politicians died. They're in serious financial straights, and can't afford to pay you. And to get you off their back, they said that it was our fault, and implied that we might have that money."

"The money was never yours. It was never the business's. In fact, it was funds misappropriated from Home by renegades who have since been dealt with. Their purpose was to destroy Home, American business, and this country. They failed, and they paid the

ultimate price for their failure. They were given a choice – learn or die. Learn to accept change and progress. Learn about the people of both dimensions that affected each other, or fail and cease to exist. They chose the latter. They judged themselves, and since they were residents of Home, were accorded the judgment of the People of Home. They no longer exist in any form.”

“You,” Muriel added, “certainly don’t need the money. You have made an extensive fortune by manipulating the stock market through insider trading. Yes, we know about that. Our methods of gathering information, or intelligence if you prefer, are far better than those of your CIA, FBI, NSA, or any of the alphabet soup of intelligence agencies that work for the government. The reason why is the very training that I have. Training that has to be accepted, and can never be demanded. Training that begins with a person’s willingness to be open and honest. And that leaves a great number of people in business and politics out in the cold.”

“You, you people who would rule the country and turn it back to the dark ages, you have too many secrets. To many things that you don’t want the public to know. Because you realize that if they did know, you would be out of your jobs, and perhaps brought to judgment in the manner of this country. But, despite your best efforts, things are leaking out. People are beginning to become aware of some of your shenanigans.”

“Now look here, young lady,” the Senator jumped up and said. “I came here to meet the Ambassador, not some whining child, and I demand that you produce her, now!”

::My turn, Mata. Ted, you might like to join the fun, too. Tex, can I ask you to come, in grays, and stand at the entrance to my office?: and Muriel sent him a visualization of where she wanted him to be.

Muriel slowly stood up. Then grew without aging. The room suddenly seemed darker, but it was actually caused by her appearing brighter as well as much larger. Her stripes glowed. Her eyes blazed. And her voice, still calm and quiet, seemed to roar at him.

“Mr. Ruggles, this has gone on long enough. I am Ambassador Muriel. Yet you won’t accept my word, my accreditation, or the evidence of your senses. You also won’t accept the fact that you aren’t going to get your way – that you can’t force someone you feel is inferior to you to do what you want. I’m tired of your trying to insult me and an entire nation that I represent because of your bigotry, chauvinism, and petty mindedness.” Muriel immediately returned to normal size.

“Tex,” she said, “would you be so kind as to take charge of this individual. I believe Treaty violations would be a sufficient charge. We may add Racketeering to the mix, later. I believe the State Police have the authority to act under these circumstances. Or, do we need some higher law enforcement organization.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can arrest him, but it might be best if you called in someone like the Secret Service,” Tex said.

And a voice, behind him, said, "I'm sure that can be arranged, Tex. Oh, and congratulations on your stripes. I'm glad to see you got here for training. Nice threads, too."

"Why, Melanie Carter. What brings you back to this neck of the woods?" Tex asked.

"Well, the national coverage of this conference might have had a bit to do with it. My boss was rolling all over the floor watching it and laughing. But when Muriel suggested that you arrest him, he thought you might like a little back-up. So, your cuffs or mine?" she asked.

"Why ma'am, I'm purely pleased to have such attractive and competent back-up. And I wouldn't think of infringing on your rights to incarcerate this dangerous alleged criminal," Tex responded.

"He sure does talk purty with that fake Texan accent, doesn't he, Muriel," she replied. "Very well"

Melanie spun the Senator and cuffed him, then rotated him back.

"Hmm," said Muriel. "I see you've managed to come up with your own signature moves. That's the third time I've known you to do that spin and cuff thing. Oh, and you might want to relieve him of that 9 millimeter in the shoulder holster under his left arm. He didn't actually draw it, so we can't add threatening with deadly force to the charges."

"Ah! Thank you 'Madam Ambassador', That's a good idea." And the gun gently found its way out from under the Senator's coat without benefit of being touched by human hands. Muriel just growled at her.

"Mister Senator Ruggles," Ted said, "You know who I am. You also know that we spoke before about your financial situation and your attitude. Now, I'm sorry to say, those financial matters have been brought to the attention of the various proper authorities, including the Senate Ethics committee and the IRS and Securities and Exchange Commission. Your accounts have been frozen, including the off-shore ones you thought nobody knew about. I'm afraid you may have to make due with a court appointed attorney. But I'm sure that you understand that no one is above the law. Especially those that make the laws."

Melanie translated the Senator out, and Don went out to let the media know that the show was over. They grumbled a bit, but Don pointed out that any of the questions that they might have asked had already been answered by the principals involved. And he was sure that the networks would be overjoyed with the feed they'd gotten, even if the reporters weren't physically on the air, themselves.

And the media was certainly happy with the reports from Enclave. Talking heads were all over themselves interpreting what had happened, and trying to find out more about the mysterious financials. Reporters were scurrying for their contacts in various agencies of the government, trying to gather more information, and were being stone-walled – being told that it was an 'ongoing investigation' and they couldn't comment. And others, with cameramen, were going after politicians, trying to get their views. A couple made the mistake of saying

that it was against the law to arrest the Senator. The reporters said that even Senators were subject to criminal law, and that Senator Ruggles was not acting on behalf of the government, but that it was strictly a personal matter. Thereafter, the politicians stuck to saying 'no comment'.

Chapter 34

Is Nothing Sacred?

(Later Friday afternoon)

"Can I finally get some lunch?" Muriel asked, flopping down in the recliner in the casual area of her office.

"Fine by me," Ted replied, selecting a place on the couch. "That's where we were going when we were so rudely interrupted."

Tex looked like he'd be rocking from foot to foot like a child if he hadn't been trained not to do that. Don finally had enough of that and pointed to the other end of the couch.

"Mata, is there such a thing as a pizza place in this Enclave?"

"Nope, Don," she replied. "But we have good relations with one outside, and they always keep a couple of pepperoni pizzas ready for us. Will that do?"

"Fine by me. How about the rest of you?" Don asked.

"Yea, sure," said Muriel.

"Great idea," said Ted.

"Um . . .," said Tex.

"Tex," Don said. "They're human. They're people. They need this as much as you do. They're not some lofty creatures that you dare not look at, and would never allow you to eat with them. Just people. Relax. You DO like pizza, don't you? Never knew a cop that didn't."

"Yea, right, squirt," Muriel said. "And how many cops do you know?"

"Two. Tex and Melanie. And I know for fact that she liked pizza."

"Oh. Well, right. Bring facts into the argument," Muriel responded. "Sheesh! The way men cheat."

Don just grinned, and Mata ordered the pizzas. One of the off-duty squad translated out and picked them up. He didn't pay for them, Enclave would be billed, and they would be paid as soon as the bill arrived. Since it was often for as many as a hundred in a day, they weren't concerned about the arrangements.

Trays arrived, and drinks were ordered just in time for the pizza to show up, hot and well stocked with both cheese and pepperoni, and they dug in.

"Mata, in case anyone comes in, we're in conference with a couple of our counselors," Muriel chuckled.

"Good thing you said that, because more are coming. No, don't eat fast. Bart's going to keep them occupied while you people relax and eat properly. I will NOT have your parents coming down on me for you getting yourself sick eating too fast. I'd never live with the shame." Mata grinned back.

"Oh, goodie. What idiots do we have to deal with, this time?" Muriel asked.

Ted responded around a mouthful of pizza, "That would probably be business and religion."

"OK, you take business. I don't know enough about it yet to hold an intelligent conversation. Or even a childish one. I'll take religion. I've dealt with them before. If all else fails, I'll take him home," Muriel said. "Besides, it's all your fault that business is here. You cut off their funds. And I had to clean up the mess with that political oaf."

"You do know how politicians get elected, don't you?" Ted asked, then answered himself. "A bunch of jerks get together in a back room, get drunk, and find the worst politician that their party has. Or maybe more. I recall one instance where five or six idiots that I wouldn't hire to wash windows on my car were all up for a presidential election. Then they tell them that they have to use their own money. Being lawyers, for the most part, that's no problem for them. They just steal it from their clients. Oh, pardon me, I mean overcharge them. So, then they go out and tell lies and rumors about each other until the population is sick of the whole thing. Of course, there are some die-hard voters that simply vote the party line. They can't be bothered with thinking for themselves, so they let someone else do their thinking for them."

"Now that sounds like religion," Muriel commented. "They don't think, they just do what their preachers tell them to do. The first time I realized this I couldn't believe it. Preachers were telling people how to vote and what to lobby their congressmen about. I always thought there was supposed to be a separation between church and state. Yet the very things that were the talking points in the last election were things that were what was considered ethical by a particular brand of fundamentalist religion. It's part of why, if I can't get the religious jerks to toe the line I take them Home. One solid dose of having to judge yourself removes all the self-deception necessary to be a preacher. Of course, I may be forced to make a couple hundred trips, but it would be worth it."

"Oh, and here comes the thundering herd," she added. "And they're ignoring their guides and coming for my door. Great."

"It's covered," Mata said. And two squads of 'kids' blocked the doors. "There's got to be fifty people out there. Couldn't they select a spokesperson? No, I guess they couldn't. Too much rivalry between the religious factions. Too much rivalry between the businesses. Too much wanting to be the one that gets the goodies at the expense of the others."

"Well," said Muriel, "so much for lunch. At least I got a couple of pieces before they descended. I have an idea. I think it's time to change their thinking. Oh, I'll be nice. I'll even be half-way polite. At least at first. You guys stay put and enjoy the pizza and floor show."

Her tray moved gently to the side and she got up and went to the back of the squads. "My friends," she said, "this is not your fight. This is one that only humans can do. Please, guard the office. I'm protected. And if I have to do what I think I will be forced to, there will be other protection for me then. Stay here Record. Keep Mata from doing something stupid," she said and chuckled. "Release the doors."

She walked between the squads and out the doors, which shut behind her. The crowd was pushed back by her shield and formed up around her on three sides so each could see her.

"Behold the girl," she said, quietly, knowing that it would at least enrage the religious nuts. "Behold the girl that dared to go to the place of judgment. Behold the girl who dared to face her judgment, and come back whole. Who, among you, is willing to so dare? Who among you can honestly face himself or herself?"

"Blasphemer! Defiler of the Holy places," began one of the preachers.

"Oh, stop with your lying cant. Your thieves cant. Your beggars cant. You do not know what I know. You have not seen what I have seen. You, who are so bound up in bleeding your congregations of money, of gaining power over them. You, who call yourselves Christian and don't even know what it is that you worship. Well, there will be no more of your lies, here. No more of your attempting to intimidate people into believing that you are the only way to their salvation. No more telling them who to vote for or what crippled piece of trash legislation they should support. You have no place in politics, because you have no understanding of real people and their needs. You, who scream for religious freedom, then tell everyone else what they should believe and holler that those not of your particular belief are pagan or devil worshipers or damned for all time."

"You do not know. But I know. And your soul knows, even if you won't pay attention to it. Are you prepared to face the judgment of your own soul? Are you so lily white that you can stand in the place of judgment and be judged?"

::Bart,:: Ted mentally hollered, ::she's going to do it. I want the square ringed . . . ::

::NO!:: a voice rang in Ted's head and throughout Enclave. ::No. It is not the Envoy's fight. And she doesn't need their protection from such as these. We've got it covered. And only three sides of the square must be covered. The fourth MUST remain open, so that they can see. So that they will know::

::Who?:: asked Ted.

::Melanie Carter's father. I've called out the Marines. Others come, also. Army, Navy,

Air Force, Coast Guard. They're all here. And there are those among us that know these men personally. They will face us and they will face themselves. I agree with Muriel, this must end. They must be shown, so that it never happens again like this. This is our fight, Ted. We are as much a part of Home as you and the Envoys, and it is for us as well as the Envoys that you've been fighting. Let her come. We're ready. We are not armed, because it isn't that type of fight. We will not harm them. If anything, they will harm themselves, but we will try to keep them from even doing that.::

"Now, you will know," said Muriel. And she and the crowd disappeared.

And appeared in the square. And Muriel saw the massed military. Those of land and sea ranked on the ground, and those of the air ranked in the air. The familiar blue uniform of the Marine Corps were in the first ranks. All were at parade rest, feet apart and hands behind their erect backs. None spoke. Then a voice rang out calling them to attention. Hands snapped to seams of trousers, left feet created a thunder as they slammed down next to their right feet. And then it was quiet.

"This is the place," Muriel said. "The place of death and life. The place of judgment. The place where the souls of the dead come to be judged. Look behind me. Look at the vacant lot, behind me. There was once a hill, there. And on that hill was a throne. Gone, now. The throne crushed to molecules, the hill leveled. The lot bare, until all have come here – a reminder of the bad days and years and centuries before. In time it will become a park with grass and flowers and trees. But for now, it is bare. And here your souls are bare, and you will know yourselves."

A figure broke ranks and came forward, faced the crowd, then walked to one man. "Father," he said. And the man broke and cried.

"No, it can't be. You're dead."

"Yes, father, I'm dead. Dead in an unjustified war that you supported. Dead doing what you wanted, killing people that had never harmed our country. And why? Because companies, big donors to your 'church' wanted the war for their profit. I'm here. I will not stay long. There is another life waiting for me. But for this time I am here, and you can see what your 'peaceful' Christianity bought. Each of us here is dead. And we all came without knowing how, came to be judged. And were judged, as you are and will be judged."

Another and another broke ranks and came forward, and sought and found a relative or friend. Each of them, each of the dead, faced a relative or friend, not as accusers but as a statement that this was real and could not be denied. And those relatives or friends broke. And in their breaking saw themselves and what they were. And one by one, the dead turned and returned to their ranks.

"Thank you," Muriel said, quietly. Thank you for being here for them and for yourselves," she told the gathered military.

"You have seen," Muriel said. "And now you know. You of business, you have had to

face the cost of what you have done. You of religion, you have had to face the lies you've told and the greed that you took into yourselves. It wasn't me that was your judge. It wasn't the Envoys. It was you, yourselves. I do not judge you. I pity you. The Envoys do not judge you, because they do not have the capacity, the knowledge and experience of what it is to be human. Only humans can judge. And to be honest with themselves, the only one that each human can judge is him or her self."

"Now, it is time to return." And the crowd was back in front of Muriel's office. She turned and walked back inside, and resumed her interrupted lunch.

Envoys came, and guided the individuals that had been a crowd back to their cars and left them there. There was pity in their eyes.

Ted, Tex and Don were quiet and said nothing as she ate. Mata sat at her desk, afraid to move, afraid that someone would want one of the ones in Muriel's office. She walled off the sound, both ways, so that nothing would disturb them – disturb her. And she refused to even contemplate sending to her. And Muriel ate. And when she was done, she gently set the tray aside again. And then she wept.

An Envoy came through the door without it opening. Mata stared, then rose, but he motioned her to take her seat. "It's alright, Matthew," he said. "Yes, I know who you are, and no, you're not living a lie. You are doing what is necessary. As I must. I have what she needs, now. Will you let me in?"

Mata just nodded, and the Envoy walked into Muriel's office and knelt at her side. "Muriel," he said, quietly. "Daughter, take my hand. Please."

"Daughter, you did what you had to do. And it was hard on you. Let me take it from you. Not the memory, no. But the pain. Let me push it back until you're ready to face it. You will always know what we, separate ones, know. And you will know how to deal with it in the future. Even without training, you were the nurturer. But this was too much for you. Let me help you heal yourself."

Then he was quiet. Her hand in his, and peace seemed to fill the air around the four in the office. Shortly, it was done, and her hand released. And he was gone.

Muriel looked up at the questioning faces. "He is one who greets the dead, the ones that come for judgment. He knew. He knew what I felt and why. And he came to give me a chance to come to grips with it, just as Carl helped Fred when he was overwhelmed. Melanie's father did better than he knew. By amassing that number of human souls in one place he created an imbalance. It was meant to affect those I brought. The guides didn't think that it would affect me, since I'd already been there and faced the death of one I loved, and more than once. But that mass was too much for me, and I felt it the way the Envoy guides do, but without their protections. That's what he gave me. And I can pass it on."

"In fact, I must. To those I've trained and the Envoys I've interacted with. That's my payment for that gift. It's time for all the Envoys to know how to do that." Muriel got up from

her chair and went to her desk. "He also brought this," she said. "The strangest record they've ever made. But, he said that the key was in what Melanie had done to create the walk through of the gallery. The guides took the massed information, with their permission, from the minds of those that had been called and came. This completes the record that Mata has on her desk and doesn't know what to do with. She can join the two together and create a new recording that can be sent to the media. The people need to see this, too. I can't watch it again. Not right now. Maybe in a couple of days, but not now. First, what he gave me has to settle and work on me. Then I can face it again, and will."

"What did he mean by 'daughter'?" asked Ted.

"Oh, that. A term of affection. There's no actual relationship between us. In fact, the term is somewhat archaic. What he meant is that I, a human, already had much of the gift that he gave me before I was trained. A nurturer. Many women and some men are. But I'd been using mine, long before I should have, to keep my friends together. To heal hurts and end feuds, and create an attitude in which they could survive despite some of the savagery around them. I never knew what it was. Only that it was something I had to do. I was already a bridge. And a wall, and a fuzzy comfort toy and all the things you might think of that a child needs. And adults need it, too."

"Why don't you go upstairs and rest," Ted said. "Or go out and walk. Anything. Don't come back to the office to work for a couple of days. Let everything settle. There're people here that can do what's needed. And if anyone but your parents wants you, then your busy and mustn't be disturbed. Don's even shown that he can take over the training. Not the diplomatic side of things, but I can cover that. Go heal and come back whole. We need you, yes. But we can survive a couple of days making do on our own. More, if you need it."

Muriel took the disc out to Mata, then translated directly to her apartment. She pattered around for a few minutes, getting a drink that she didn't want, looking at furniture, examining the detail of the design on the wall. Then finally she closed the drapes on her windows and lay down.

"Mata?" Ted asked, "what did she see?"

"Oh, that poor girl. I'll kill her, then bring her back and kill her again." Then Mata broke.

"I knew him," Mata said, softly. "He was the one that started the guides. He kept them going, all this time. I didn't even know he was still alive. So many died during those times. When he started, he asked me to join him. I already had some of what was needed. It would have been so easy to learn the rest. But I was afraid of being caught. I said no. He could have sent anyone. He came himself to help her. Because he knew. He and she were just alike. A human and an Envoy. And he knew it."

"Mata. What did she see? What upset her so?"

"Look for yourself. I can't tell you. I'm not sure I could have taken it."

Ted took the disc back to Muriel's desk and put it in the computer. And watched from the arrival, through the departure, and to the breakup of the massed military. Then he just set there, shaking his head.

"She didn't know. All those dead. Even of just the ones that had family in that crowd, it would have been too much. But she felt all those dead. Silent. Waiting. Not judging. The first was the closest to judging that any of them came. But all of them at once, and all from one group – the military of just this country. And at that, only the most recent, the ones that hadn't returned. How bad? How bad will it affect her?" Ted asked.

"I don't know. If he gave her what I think he gave her, very little if any. If he found a way to upgrade it, maybe not at all. It won't stop her from being who she is, but if she's affected, then we can't let her do it again," Mata replied. "We can only wait and hope, and see when she comes back to work – when she feels ready to come back to work. We can only wait."

Chapter 35

The Job in Front of You

(Saturday morning)

Muriel woke up feeling revitalized. Sent down to Mata to ask if she'd ask a couple of girls to come make breakfast for her, while she showered and stuff. Mata offered to be one of them, but Muriel didn't want her to have to break away from what she was doing. Fifteen minutes later a trucker style breakfast was waiting for her as she stepped out of the shower and into her uniform. Steak and eggs, hash brown potatoes, milk – the one difference from most truckers that had coffee that would dissolve a spoon – and a fruit cup. The girls cheated. They ordered from one of the 'red neck' restaurants.

Then it was translate downstairs and into her office. Mata checked her as she went by, but Muriel seemed perfectly alright and balanced. Mata put in a quick send to Caleb and asked if this was normal. Something seemed wrong, and she couldn't tell what. Just that Muriel seemed too cheerful. Caleb came, and walked straight into Muriel's office and sat across the desk from her.

“Hi, Caleb,” Muriel said.

“You know my name?”

“Yes. Mata and I are deep linked. Sometimes when she sends, even private send, she leaks across. I was going to tell her when you walked in. I doesn't happen often. But I think she was agitated about me, so I caught it.” Muriel offered her hand.

“You don't mind? Most humans do.”

“I'm not most humans. I think I've had a rudimentary touch with my friends for years. Then Mata taught me to link, and I knew I did. Not much, just leakage that most humans have, but I could pick it up. Being able to send, too, made it so much better. And with Mata, cozier. Caleb, I know who you are, and I know what you do. And I know that, in a sense, you're doing the same sort of thing that Ted is. I also know that you pulled me back. And that you are non-judgmental. So, yes, dig. If you find anything, then we need to correct it. I want to be me and stable, but I don't ever want to forget. I owe it to them.

“Them, who?” asked Caleb.

“All of them. The ones that came out and met family. The ones that stood support and didn't have family there, and mourned. The idiots that I took Home and subjected to that onslaught. It wasn't really fair for any of them. But it had to be done, anyway. I think it would have been as hard on me if I'd taken them up one at a time and they only saw family. But, it was the job I had to do, even though I wasn't trained for it. Even now, I think it would be too much. Need me to shut up so you can concentrate?”

"Nope," Caleb said. "Actually, talking makes it easier. It can sometimes spark things that wouldn't show unless they were referenced to. How do you and Ted get along?"

"Um, well, for the most part, good. But he's got something deep, and he won't talk to anyone. Mata thinks it might have something to do with young girls, simply because of what he tries to avoid. But he's never shown that to me, so I don't know. And since he got his fifth stripe he seems easier."

"Uh, huh. And how about you? How do you feel about him," Caleb asked.

"That's harder. I like him. He's a friend. And we kid each other and I don't see any warning signs in the kidding, like his taking offense at something or avoiding something. But there's something there and it bothers me that I can't do anything about it."

"Sounds pretty normal. And sounds like you're pretty stable. How would you feel about my setting Mata on you, just to keep an eye on you?"

"No problem," said Muriel. "I kinda figured that that's what she wanted with the deep link, anyway. She'd hinted at it for a while, then we found out that leaking across was the reason that I learned so fast, and pretty much taught myself the techniques. Since the link was there anyway, I told her to go ahead and go deep. It's changed me a bit. It's also changed her a bit. But we're not becoming each other. More like we're adding skills and some attitudes to each other that we each use in our own ways. So, yea, I have no problem with her watching me for trouble. I trust her. And I trust you."

"Why?" asked Caleb. "Why do you trust me. You don't know me. Other than that I'm a guide and console the humans that arrive at the place of judgment. So, why me?"

"Well," Muriel said, "for one thing, you're an Envoy and have a white soul. That doesn't mean you can't hurt me, but does mean that you're not likely to want to or do so intentionally. Also, you're more adult acting, not like my motley crew that I've corrupted. And you seem obviously concerned about me. But mostly, because Mata knows you and trusts you."

"So, why do you think that I'm obviously concerned about you?"

"You do know that you're acting and sounding like a psychologist, don't you?" Muriel asked.

"Is that bad?" asked Caleb?

"Yes. It's artificial. And Humans use that trick to try to get people to say things that they don't want to say."

"So, what can I do about it?"

"Well, you could stop pussy-footing around and ask me directly. I might not know all

the answer, but I bet that I might know some of it," Muriel said with a grin.

"OK, so what's wrong?"

"I don't know that anything is," Muriel said. "It's just that I'm starting to feel confused. I'm growing up, and I don't understand some of what I feel or catch myself thinking. And I don't know what to do about it, and I'm afraid it's going to affect my work. And it's not an Envoy thing, because Envoys don't have bodies so they don't have the problems that drive humans. And I don't feel that there's anyone I can talk to about it. And it's embarrassing."

"Oh." Caleb sat, thinking, for a moment. "Oh, that. You're right. We can't really help. Oh, Mark might be able to help you with some of it. Your mother probably could . . ."

"But she's the last person that I'd want to tell. After all, girls aren't supposed to think like this. We're taught that it's wrong," Muriel said.

"You need an older sister or friend. And you don't have one, and you're trying to tough it out alone. And I don't have an answer for you. On any of it, especially how it might affect your work," he said, almost more to himself than to her. "I'll have to think about this."

A girl walked up to the door, accompanied by an Envoy, and went to Mata's desk. "Excuse me," she said, "is there someone that could help me?"

"Sure, lots of people. What's the problem?" Mata asked.

"My brother's sick. Mom and dad brought him here to see if there was something you could do."

Muriel left her office and went to the girl. "Where is your brother, now?"

"Mom and dad were seeing about getting a room, or something," the girl replied.

Muriel looked away for a moment, then said to the Envoy, "Thanks for bringing her here. I'll take it from here." And to the girl, said, "I know where they are. We'll go directly there. This may startle you, but don't be alarmed. We don't necessarily travel the way others do." Then took the girl's arm and translated them outside the door of a room in the Guest Hotel, and knocked.

"WOW! How'd you do that?" the girl asked.

"Oh, I just decided that I didn't want to travel every inch between my office and here. So I didn't," Muriel grinned.

A man answered the door, looked at Muriel then looked at the girl and said, "You found someone?"

Muriel short-circuited the conversation by saying, "My name is Muriel. I understand

your son is sick. May I see him?"

The man looked startled, then said, "Yes, sure. We put him to bed," he added, leading her to a small bedroom. "He just looked so weak from the trip."

"I'll try not to disturb him too much. How long has he been sick?"

"Oh," the man said, "about a week. We took him to a hospital, but they said there wasn't anything they could do for him. I figured, since you have different ways of doing things, maybe you'd be able to. Are you a doctor?"

"No, but I have some skills, and we have a really good Envoy that can handle a lot. Hi, little man," Muriel said, "I'm Muriel. That's really bad, isn't it, calling you 'little man'. And here I'm not much bigger." The boy smiled, weakly, and Muriel put her hand on the boy's shoulder, comfortingly.

::MARK!: she sent adding what she felt from the boy's body. ::I don't know what he's got, but it looks like it's killing him.::

Mark popped in behind Muriel and pushed her out of the way, taking the boy's shoulder in his hand. "This is going to take some time," he said. "Muriel, you did just right. The information you sent showed me what you saw. We can fix this. Sir?" he added to the man, "Do you have to be anywhere, you or your wife, for the next week?"

"We're on vacation. Two weeks. I took it as an emergency leave when the hospital said they couldn't do anything. Can you really help him?" the man asked.

"Yes. Definitely. The only reason it will take time is to get him back into shape slowly, so as to not shock his system. I'll move him now to the clinic, if you don't mind, and start the process." As Mark went unfocused for a moment, the man said, "But the hospital said there was nothing they could do!"

"There isn't. For them," Muriel said. "We have other skills, here. I'm going to check with management, then I'll show you all how to find the clinic. Let's step out to the living room for a moment while he gets transferred. Mark's bringing two Envoys and a gurney, and it would be crowded."

"Maybe I should wait at the door for them?" the man half-asked.

"Not necessary," Mark replied, following the gurney out of the room. "And not necessary for you to show them the long way. I've got an aid that has nothing to do all day. I'll have him translate them where-ever they need to go. It'll do him good to get out. Now, young man," Mark added to the boy, "You're going to take a short trip, then some nurses will help you into bed. In fact, probably three of them. Things are slow right now. Let them. We're Envoys, and don't embarrass, and are as impersonal as robots. Thinking of us like that might be easier." As Mark turned away from the boy, the two Envoys and the gurney disappeared. The father sat down, suddenly, on the couch, and the mother looked like she'd

faint.

"This one isn't mine, Mark. You did it yourself!" Muriel said, grinning. "So don't think you can pin it on me."

"Where'd they go?" the father asked.

"To the clinic. On foot, it's a bit of a distance. But by translating him directly there we save time – not really important now – and jarring to his system. He'll be in bed in minutes. Muriel," Mark added, "once you've got them calmed down some, why don't you bring them over. We can show them around and assure them that their son is alright now."

"Sure," Muriel said to his disappearing back. She went over to the boy's mother and boosted blood pressure and energy a bit, and the woman recovered quickly. "Now, let me try again. My name is Muriel, and I'm human. Mark, on the other hand, is an Envoy, and has made it his business to know about humans and their diseases, and how to fix things from a banged up finger to some really nasty diseases. He doesn't work like a human doctor. He's able to see what's wrong with a person, and do something about it with nothing more than holding a hand or touching a shoulder. If Mark says that your son can be fixed, then he's not kidding or guessing. He can. He can't lie."

"I checked with the management, here. They realized what the problem was, but not the immediacy or they'd have called Mark before you even checked in. You're listed as guests of Enclave. That means that your rooms and food are charged to Enclave, and not to you. Your son's care, in the clinic, is also charged to Enclave. The Envoy that Mark sends"

"Are you talking about me?" asked a male voice. "I'm Jared. And I'll be your guide. Just say my name and I'll pop up like a jinn, only without the smoke." This brought a weak smile from the mother, and a look of disbelief from the father.

". . . OK, Jared, can show you around Enclave and take you to your son any time you want. Anything you see that you need or want will also be charged to Enclave. Just remember that you still have to get it home." Muriel grinned.

"Why?" asked the father.

"Why what? Oh, you mean the 'no cost' thing?" Muriel asked. "You're our guests and under our protection while you're here. We take protection very seriously. It's an Envoy thing. Despite the name meaning 'messenger', they're actually protectors."

"But, don't you have to get authorization or something?"

"From who? The only other person that could give anything like that, if it was necessary, is Ted. The Ambassador. Well, one of them," Muriel said.

"But what about the other one. I thought there was a new Ambassador," the mother

said. "Wasn't some woman just made an Ambassador?"

"Not woman. Girl. Twelve years old. Named Muriel." Muriel took out her passport and handed it to the mother. "I don't think I caught your names in all the excitement."

"Oh, of course. I'm George French. I teach English at a college not far from here. "This is my wife, Maryanne. Her friends just call her Merry, because she's usually happy. And my daughter, Sally. She's always taking off an going places. She just kind of sallies forth." Muriel heard a groan in her head with that one. "My son's name is Peter."

"Mr. and Mrs. French," Jared interrupted. "You're son's settled in his room, now. Mark has worked on him some, and he's had something to eat. If you'd like to go see where he'll be staying and assure yourselves that he's all right, I'd be happy to take you."

"Mom," said Sally, handing Muriel back her passport, "If it's all right, I'd like to talk to Muriel, for a little. Besides, it's probably not a good idea for us all to be trooping in at once. I'll get over to see him, later."

"That's Ambassador Muriel, young lady," her father said.

"Just Muriel," Muriel said, quietly. "We, Ted and I, only use titles for formal occasions. Or when we want to intimidate someone. It makes it friendlier that way, and easier to talk to people. Besides, I'm only twelve," she said and grinned.

"But, how will you get there?" her mother asked.

"Mrs. French, I've got a security detail of twenty Envoys and an Envoy Security Chief. I'm sure one of them would be more than willing to take her. And it would be no problem. Only one squad out of the four is on duty at a time, except in emergencies. And they're always waiting for me to find something for them to do in their off time. We'll take good care of her. In fact, I'll take her to my office where she'll be under the ever present observation of my Security Chief. We'll even take care of lunch. And my crew and my friends are always happy to see new people."

"Well . . . all right. If you're sure it won't be a problem."

"No problem at all," said Muriel, and took Sally's arm and disappeared.

Jared helped Merry off the couch as her husband got up, and translated them directly to Peter's room.

Chapter 36

Help in Time of Need

(Saturday morning and afternoon)

As they took seats in the casual area of her office, Muriel asked, "So, what's up?"

"What's it take to get trained. I mean, how much time and the cost, and . . . well . . . everything."

"Training is free. Likewise room and board and clothing. It took me two days. My parents took it in four, but never completed it. They could have, they chose not to. I've had two people take it in one day. It's a lot of work, and some strain, and not everyone can take it. The ones that can't are weeded out with the first test," Muriel said. "But why do you want it? Just as a trophy, a way of showing you're different? A way to impress someone?"

"NO! No. If I'd had the training, could I have known that Peter was sick? Could I have done something?"

"Maybe. Probably," Muriel said. "If nothing else, you could have got him here before he became so serious." Muriel thought for a couple of seconds, then told Sally to look at the chair on the other side of the casual area. "Mata," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Mata replied, sitting primly in the chair.

" 'Yes, ma'am' my left foot! Here I am trying to calm her down, and you go treating me like a tyrant!"

"Of course," said Mata. "After all, you brow-beat everyone, constantly tease your Detail, make us work and slave at all hours doing horrible things, then take credit for everything that's done right and blame us if it's wrong . . ."

"Oh, 'of course' is it. You spying on me every moment so I don't get any peace or privacy. A man playing at being a little girl. Siccing a squad on me every time I go out. Beast!"

"Tyrant."

"Obsessive/compulsive," responded Muriel

"Ooo! The little girl learned a new term!" Mata shot back, grinning.

"You'd be surprised at what I've learned about you," Muriel remarked, sharing the grin.

"All through playing now, can we get to work?" Mata said.

"Work? You call what we do 'work'?" Muriel responded.

"Well, sometimes. So, what can I do for you, oh great and terrible Ambassador?"

" 'oh great and terrible' is it? I could always sic Ted on you."

"Oh, oh. A death worse than fate. So, what's up, boss?" Mata asked, as the laughter settled down.

Poor Sally just sat there, looking back and forth between the two goofing people, one an Ambassador that should be dignified, and the other an Envoy that was certainly older than she looked, and more mature. Yet they were bashing each other, verbally, as if they were kids.

"Caught on, yet, Sally?" Mata said. "Don't take life so seriously. We don't bite. We do goof and play. 'Rank' is more a matter of who came up with an idea first than of who's boss. We treat each other as equals and friends more than boss and employee. Most of all, we care. We're a security detail. Know what that means? It means that sometimes we go with Muriel to intimidate people or show off. The rest of the time we go looking for ways to make her happy, comfortable, and feeling secure. She doesn't need protectors. She can protect herself, and has, repeatedly."

"Sally, it's like your dad's bad pun about when you sally forth. Or, I'm sure, there's one about your brother being petered out," Muriel said. "There's no harm in it, except maybe boredom with hearing it every other day. It relieves tension and frustration without really hurting anyone's feelings. This is a kid's office. And the kid is in charge. Except when overruled by just about anybody." Mata stuck her tongue out at her. "But we do do some serious work, here. Gathering information and analyzing it, training people, sometimes putting out the 'fires' that other people start. Sometimes rescuing people, like the pile-up on the expressway. The rest of the time we find things to do. We goof. We tease. We do kid things. We stay sane, because the rest of the world is crazy."

"Most of the time," Mata said, "except for keeping her shield up and bopping around from place to place without bothering with the distance in between, Muriel's just here being a kid finding things to do or questions to ask. Most of the time not only not knowing the answers but not even knowing the questions. Look at her. YOU'VE got more experience at living than she does. And we can't help her. We aren't what you'd call 'alive'. We've never had bodies, never gone through the experiences you have, never known the fears, sometimes never even known the joys."

"OK," Sally said. "I can see that. So, I'll make a trade. I'll try to answer questions and be a friend for the chance," and she stressed the word 'chance', "to learn, myself. How does it start? What do I need to do?"

"Relax, mostly. We're not going to bite," Mata said. "We're just here to be friends. Share a moment, kid each other, share little secrets. Oops. I saw that glitch. No, nothing

personal, or at least no more personal than you'd tell your friends. Just goofing. Just fooling around and playing little harmless games. Like, for instance, you see where I am. How far across the room I am. So close your eyes. Pretend that I've got a door in front of me. Walk over, in your mind, and knock on the door."

::??::

::Yes, Sally, you can be trained,:: Mata said in her head. ::Uh, huh. Just like that, you passed the first test. So let's go back to talking out loud.::

"You mean, that's IT?"

"Yes and no," replied Mata. "Now the more serious work starts. Where we torture you and make you do unspeakable things, and take off your clothes, and stuff."

"MATA! Be nice. Yes, there are things that you've never thought of that we'll teach you. And some of them are hard, and some of it is scary, But we'll be with you all the way, and we promise you won't get hurt. And we'll be done in time for lunch."

"Um . . . are you really going to make me take my clothes off?"

"Yea, but it's not what you think. First, it'll be in my apartment with Mata acting as chaperon. So, no boys. Second, it'll be to teach you how to make your own clothes. Always a perfect fit, no cost of buying new ones. Instant change whenever you like," Muriel said, "like this." And she switched to jeans and short sleeved shirt, the stripes looking like matching form-fitting bracelets on her wrists. "Ready to get started?"

"YEA!"

True to her word, Muriel and Mata had her powered up, protected and in new clothes by lunchtime. The shield test had been as successful as it was surprising to Sally. She'd caught a glimpse of Don and his baseball bat just before he'd struck, and had flinched. But the bat had never connected. Then they'd gone upstairs and had a field-day trying on new clothes.

"Well," Sally said, "you were true to your word, Mata. You tortured me before you showed me how to find power and connect. Then you had me doing unspeakable things making shields. Then you made me take off my clothes. And that baseball bat was definitely scary, Muriel."

"Not as scary being shot by your own squad," Muriel said. "And then I realized that the slugs hadn't hit me, and I picked them out of the air, and realized that I'd passed the shielding test. This way is a lot quieter, though," she added with a chuckle. "So, what do you want to do for lunch. Have it here, go to a restaurant or gather up your parents and eat somewhere?" she asked.

"Um . . . what's the next one?" Sally asked.

“Learning to translate from one spot to another,” Muriel said.

“Um . . . uh”

“You want to learn to do that, first, huh?” said Muriel. “You want to make the grand entrance to your brother's room on your own.”

“Could I?” Sally asked.

“Mata, what do you think?”

“Here to your apartment a few times, if you let the shields pass her. Then one to Ted's old office. I don't see why not. Maybe fifteen minutes.”

So that's what they did. First showing her how, in her mind. Then paralleling her for her first solo. A few more for practice, then one to a place she'd never been, to show her how it was done from only a visualization. Then they alerted Jared to keep her parents on the far side of the room. And Sally set off a small bell where she'd be coming in, to attract attention, then walked into his room – one moment not there, the next walking toward him.

“How's it going, Pete?” Muriel and Mata followed her quietly.

“Sally,” Peter said. “Did you just . . . ?”

“Yep. On my own,” she replied.

“Which reminds me,” Muriel said. “We have some unfinished business. Hold your arms up like this.” Muriel's stripes glowed slightly as Sally complied. Suddenly, there were three stripes on her wrists, and Peter's and her parents eyes were bugged out. “Two more to go. That's after lunch. And these will only show up when you want them to, or to Envoys or those with the training. So you won't be the freak at school,” she added with an impish grin.

“In that case,” Sally said, “I'd be the only one that wasn't. So, where would people like to go for lunch?”

“How about right here,” Mark said, as he walked in. “The room is large enough that we can set up chairs and tables around Peter's bed, and he can join in. And believe me, we can have anything you can think of for lunch. We can always bring it in from one of the restaurants in the Enclave.”

“I think I'd like that. We need to feel like a family, again,” Mr. French said. Merry agreed and Sally echoed it. “How about you, Muriel. Will you join us?”

“Nope. This is family time, and I'll leave you to it. But it's good to see Peter so improved. A little time to regain his strength and he'll be good to go. Sally, you know how to get to my office. Come when you're ready, and we'll see about completing your training.”

Muriel and Mata left, quietly.

“What did she mean, 'complete your training'?” George asked his daughter.

“One more test. This is supposed to be the easiest, since it's very much like what I did walking in here. Just the location is strange. Home. Where the Envoys come from. It's like a different dimension. So, I go and come back, and I'm finished.”

“Honey,” her mother asked, “Where'd you get that dress? I don't remember getting you anything like that.”

“You didn't. And no, I didn't borrow it from Muriel,” Sally said. “She's smaller than I am, anyway. I made it. Just like this,” and she switched to what she'd been wearing when she came to Enclave. Then she switched to a uniform like Muriel's, then back to the dress. “It saves a lot on clothes. But more than that, the skill means that I can make anything that I can think of. Then, there's being able to call for help without using a telephone or even my voice. Or being able to withstand an attack and never be touched. And I've just scratched the surface. Muriel says that you never really stop learning what you can do with the training. That's why it's only the basic training that you get awards for. After that, they figure you're rewarding yourself. The stripes just show that you've got the basics down, and are competent.”

Lunch came, courtesy of Mark and his three nurses, along with tray tables and chairs, and the family settled down to the sorts of small-talk one would expect in a family with children. Some was banter, some was warnings, some was projections of what they'd like to do in the future, or what was going on in school. In some ways, it was over too soon for Sally. But she was anxious to get back to Muriel and the training.

The trip to Home was almost anticlimactic. Almost. Learning how to make that twist to enter the other dimension was simple, though Sally took it VERY seriously. No, what made it stand out was the destination. It's one thing to say that you're going to Home, the place the Envoys come from. It's entirely another to realize that EVERYBODY goes there, sooner or later. By dying. That was brought home by meeting a girl that had been dead for more than a year – a friend of Muriel's. That sobered Sally up, tremendously. Then she was hit by the realization of what the Envoys must be. And she, little Sally, could go there any time she wanted to. And come back, which most humans couldn't do.

She spent some time in Muriel's office trying to put the whole experience into some sort of perspective that she could deal with. “It won't ever leave me, will it,” Sally said.

“Nope. And that's a good thing, really. It puts who you are and what you do into a different light. You're your own judge. You're the final verdict on how you've lived, and whether you've done what you could,” Muriel said. “But it has it's up side, too. You can ALWAYS go back. Talk with those who have left earth the hard way. Give them your respect. Honor them. Rejoice with them in their choices for the future, and know that there is one.”

“I gotta get my head out of this,” Sally said. “Muriel, to change the subject, you've got a

problem. It's not a big one, or a serious one, but it's one I recognize from having been there myself. But I had friends that went through it before me to help me understand. And I can help you. But not here. Can we go to your apartment? And is there anything remotely resembling privacy around here with everybody in your head?"

"Yes, and yes. And if I request it, even Mata would stay out of my head. Which just leaves you and I. By the way, Mata wouldn't judge you or your thoughts or actions. Not the way you believe, anyway. She might caution you against something that would harm you or others, but that's protection not judgment. Envoys can't judge. So, let's go."

So, they went. After some awkward fumbling around with how to do it, Sally passed Muriel a load of experiences that she'd had just being a girl, and a little more knowledgeable than the young Ambassador. Muriel went through it, blushed a few times, and giggled a lot. But suddenly a weight seemed to lift from her shoulders. She knew, now, what had been bothering her, and knew how to deal with it. Puberty can be so much a pain for those with no knowledge of what they were facing. And that's not just the physical side of it, but the emotional and ethical side of it.

Muriel was finally grinning when they came back to her office, and Mata noted this and the strain that seemed to have lifted from her ward and boss. So, when Muriel suggested going back to the clinic to put the last stripes on Sally, she was willing to go with a very eased mind. Ted had already told Muriel that she could award the fifth stripe, where it was appropriate, and Mata had confirmed that Sally was eligible. Ted also had showed her how to create the passports, complete with the Home logo on the face and on the certificates. He did ask that she talk to him, first, about any that might be considered for diplomatic passports.

Muriel checked with Mark and Jared to be sure there wouldn't be any conflicts, and Sally scanned the image of her parents and Peter to see if they'd be interrupting anything. Then she 'rang the bell' and they walked into the room. "Well, that's done," said Sally.

"Not quite," Muriel responded. "There's a little matter of your final stripe." So Sally put her arms up where she could see them, and a fourth stripe appeared. "The fifth one isn't an award as much as it is an acknowledgment. A precious or semi-precious stone is the basis for it, and it indicates that the person who has it is balanced and has good judgment. So, what's your favorite gem?"

"Emerald," Sally promptly replied, and emerald Turk's Head knots appeared between paired silver stripes on each arm.

"And one other thing," Muriel said. "Check your 'no pocket'."

Sally did, and pulled out a green booklet with a distinctive logo on the front. She opened it, read the certificate inside, and busted out crying. She waved people off, and finally managed to say, "It's all right. I'm not upset. Just happy. I knew, intellectually, what the trip Home meant. But the certificate just made it emotional. I'm a Citizen of Home. I can go in and out of it any time I want. I can talk to anyone there, for any reason." Slowly, the words came clearer and with less gaps and sniffles, so that by the time she had finished she was

beaming. She showed her parents the certificate, then her brother.

Ted casually 'just stopped by' about then, and stuck his head in the door. "Congratulations, Sally. Very well done, all the way around." Then he looked around and spotted George opening and closing his mouth. "Oh, stop," Ted said. "Fish do a better job of imitating people gasping for air than people do imitating fish. I'm just a guy named Ted."

"But . . . but you're the leader of a nation!" George said.

"Oh, Muriel, Muriel, Muriel. What AM I going to do with you? You didn't tell them?"

"Well, they were having enough trouble getting their minds around my being an Ambassador that I didn't think it would be polite to mention the other. Besides, it isn't like it's a big thing, or anything. I mean, you got the job because nobody else wanted it. At least nobody in their right mind. And we ALL know that you aren't in your right mind," Muriel tossed back. "Besides, being co-leader just means that I get to ask you what I'm supposed to do next."

"Yea," Ted responded, "and then you go off and do whatever you want to do."

"Well, of course. After all, everyone knows that men have about as much logic and control as a Spaniel wanting to play fetch," said Muriel with a grin.

"It's better than spending half the morning trying on dresses," was his rejoinder, and they were both laughing.

"You're really getting the hang of loosening up and tossing barbs around, Ted."

"I had to. Bart and Mata teamed up on me. I spent the next hour with abdominal cramps from the laughter."

"Are you people always like this?" asked Mrs. French. "You sound like a couple of kids going at it."

"Yea, pretty much. Bart and I have always tossed zingers at each other. But not the way Muriel and her friends did," Ted said. "Then I found out why they do it. To relieve tension and frustration, in themselves or in others. And Bart, my Security Chief, has been helping me learn their way of thinking. I think it's beautiful, myself. Sometimes it's good to be child-like."

"Well," Muriel said, "I think it's time we got out of the way and let these people have some time without us." She, Mata and Ted turned and left.

Chapter 37

You Can Go Home, Again (Sunday morning)

Muriel was getting ready to visit her parents when she got the call from Mata. ::We've got trouble. Better get down here right away. I've alerted Ted.::

Muriel scanned the area before translating, realized the area in front of Mata's desk was occupied and did something that she probably shouldn't have. She created a shield, anchored, and pushed the crowd back away from the desk, then translated into it.

"Gentlemen . . . and Ladies. I don't know what you think you want or what you think you're doing here, but I will not have you harassing my Security Chief," she said. And in a mental link to her squads sent, ::First squad! Behind Mata. The other three in the road. Now. We bottle them up. I'll push them out to you.:: Her crew didn't bat an eye, and the action was about as fast as a person could blink.

Another mental voice rang out, ::First, join the other three. We've got Mata's back.:: and twelve real kids took over for the first squad – Don and his baseball bat in front of them. Muriel just grinned to herself. The kids had found another 'mother'.

"Outside, all of you," Muriel said. "You're obviously here to be disrespectful, and I won't allow it in my office. OUT!" And she pushed. Unwillingly, and skidding feet all the way, they left.

The crowd found itself inside a large square defined by the combined squads of Ted and Muriel. And coming through one side of the square were a bunch of kids, one of which came up beside Muriel. "Put the bat away, Don," she said. Instead, he rested the end of it on the ground with his hands on the handle end of it, and sniffed the air.

"Ya know, Muriel?" Don asked. "I smell something funny. Smells like slimy bullies. And you know how I like bullies. Now, I wouldn't do anything to hurt them TOO bad. But I do understand that kneecapping does wonders for their disposition. Really reforms them, because it's hard to run when your knees don't work right."

"Put it away, Don," Muriel said. "This isn't that kind of fight. These 'good' people are going to choose a spokesperson, and that person is going to talk intelligibly and intelligently about what their concerns are. Of course, if they make the wrong choice they may be forced to choose again. I, also recognize the smell. And you're almost right. They are bullies, but a particular brand of bullies. These are a prime example of the species of fundamentalist religious clergy that have taken time off from fleecing their flock to come try to pull the wool over our eyes. Things could get hairy, but not for us."

Ted, standing on the other side of her, just looked sheepish as if to ask if she had really

said that.

“Alright, people,” Muriel said, walking slowly across the line of clerics, “Which one of you is intelligent enough to talk to me without resorting to attempting to humiliate me with some religious cant. Which one can actually present your position without trying to preach to me, because I’ll tell you right now that if you resort to attempting to force your dogma, your guilt, onto me you WILL be silenced. Is that understood? What? No answer? Well, you will understand if you try. I’m tired of the disrespect that overly religious people show, trying to tell the rest of the world how to live, trying to control the lives of the rest of the world with lies, fear and guilt.”

“My name is Muriel,” she went on. “And, if you had the intelligence to be able to read the sign on my window, you know that I am the Ambassador from Home to the people of America. What you may not know is that I was also chosen to be one of the two leaders of that nation. Now, some bright boy or girl among you is going to say it’s a hoax. It isn’t. I’ve been there and come back. So have a number of other people. Some of them children. Some of them adults. They know. Everybody goes Home sometime. You will go Home because you’ve died. They, and I, went Home because we wanted to, and came back alive.”

“Some of your friends,” she said, “went to Home. I took them. Now they know. No belief is necessary when you know the truth. And I bet you’ve come here to tell me that they’re wrong because what they tell you – the truth – doesn’t line up with what you believe. Guess what? Those who choose belief in a falsehood over something that they can see and touch and experience are the ones that are wrong. And what you have chosen is to believe in a falsehood – a lie – and one of your own devising. Well, I’m tired of people that won’t open their eyes to the truth when it’s right in front of them.”

“You have trespassed on Envoy property – yes, we own this land, outright. I’ve seen the documentation. And all the taxes and other fees are paid up for the next hundred years, well beyond your lifespan. In addition, this entire Enclave is an Embassy. Not just my office, but the entire Enclave. So, you have entered an Embassy of a friendly foreign nation under false pretenses in an attempt to confront us and drive us out. Sorry, people, but we’re not leaving. The truth doesn’t leave just because you choose to believe a lie. However, I am within my rights to refuse to allow you access to this open facility. You will be transported to a location outside the Enclave. Your cars, which are parked on Embassy property, will be brought to you, and you will leave. You will not be allowed to return. No force will be involved, you simply will be unable to gain entrance to any Envoy property for any reason. You will go to your death and face your judgment alone. And there is no mercy in that judgment – no compassion – no forgiveness. You will know and will have to face yourselves and what you have chosen to believe. No Envoy will help you or soothe you or guide you to a resolution of your feelings. You have chosen to cause harm to innocent people by telling them lies and feeding on their guilt in order to gain riches and power. And you will find that you rejected true riches, true power, with your lies that you chose to believe yourselves.”

“Goodbye,” Muriel said, with finality. And the massed group found themselves in the street outside Enclave. Cars were translated, one at a time, and they left.

Ted said, "Do you know what happens to those who aren't comforted and led to understanding themselves in home?"

"Yes," Muriel replied. "Many of them found themselves in such a situation before you got there. They live, if you want to call it that, in an agony of their own shame and guilt for what they have done until they finally accept that they were wrong. The same judgment that we faced. And the only solution is the one we found. Balance. Self understanding. 'Know Thyself' in its ultimate form. That's what overwhelmed me with my last trip. All those dead that had had to go through that and finally come out the other side, understanding. All that pain marked on those souls, and there was nothing I could do to relieve it for them. And I cried for them. But these. These I will not cry for. These brought their doom on themselves, and I will let them experience it. Judgment. They have judged themselves. And I won't interfere with that judgment."

"That's harsh," Ted said.

"Yes. But it's a harshness of their choosing. I'm not rejecting them. They're rejecting us. So, I let them. And that's what this is really all about. Choice."

"Honey? Are you OK?"

"Mom! Dad! I'm sorry, I got interrupted and didn't get a chance to let you know I'd be late," Muriel said. "Yes, I'm all right. Just unexpectedly busy, but I'm free now. So, where would you like to go to eat. My treat."

"Your treat, my left foot," said her father. "Nobody pays for anything, here. However, there is this restaurant that looks promising . . ." and the three wandered off in that direction.

"What have I done, Mata?" Ted asked.

"Not you, Ted. She," Mata replied. "She's growing up. And she's accepted that she can't help everyone, because they choose to not help themselves. We can't force people, because that would be a judgment imposed by us, just as those idiots are trying to do to their followers. It's a hard lesson, both ways. But she's right."

"I don't like it," Ted commented.

"Neither does she. But she accepts it. So do the Envoys. We've had to over the centuries. We didn't like it, either. We accepted you because you gave us some hope that it would end. And it will. It just takes time. Be patient, you have no reason to feel guilt over those that refuse to accept what we offer. They will, in time. Some people just won't accept that some of what happens is their fault, so they need someone or something to blame. And so they create some sort of deity and blame him or her. Only the deity doesn't exist. They'll find out."

"So," Ted said, "what's happening with Peter and his family?"

"Oh, good news, there," Mata said. "Peter is gaining strength all the time. Mark gave him a temporary tie to power, and he's been drawing on it and building himself up. He's up and walking around, and driving his nurses up the wall with questions and finding things for him to do. With Sally, things were up and down for a while. Her parents were after her about going off and getting the training without their permission. Then she talked them through what the tests were, and what could be accomplished at each level. Actually, she did a very good job of being patient with them and not reacting to their implied criticism of her. Finally, they realized that the training was actually a good thing. Now, they're thinking of having Peter try, once he's strong enough to take it."

"OK," Ted said. "Peter's younger than I'd like to have to take training. I'd prefer if we could hold off until he was twelve or so. I think, by accident, I stumbled on Muriel at just the right time. Young enough to accept it, and old enough to be responsible. Her friends were the same, though I see some variation between them as to who is responsible and to what degree. But it's good that their parents are accepting Sally."

"I think," said Mata, "that the biggest part of it was that she WOULDN'T be on the front line, like Muriel. She took it because she wanted to help and protect Peter, not because she wanted out of a bad situation, herself. When they realized that, they backed off of a lot of the problems about her taking it. I think it's worked itself out, except maybe what happens when they're faced with her actually using the training."

"And then there's OUR problem child," Mata added. "Muriel has changed. And the change occurred just after Sally went Home and back. They went up to Muriel's apartment. I could feel a lot of giggling and blushing going on, but she even had me locked out of anything but just surface stuff and even that was emergency only and only one way. Her side was locked down. However, from some guesses and some behavioral changes, I think it had to do with the fact that she's human and going through some hormonal changes and getting feelings and emotions that she hadn't had before. Sally, being older, has already gone through them. I think Sally told her about the changes and what they're like from the inside, and how to deal with them. I do know that she's a lot more confident in herself, well you saw that, today. She COULD have blown up at them, and done the same thing that she did with the first lot. Instead, she read them the riot act in a calm, quiet voice, then threw them out. No emotion, not upheaval, no doubts. Just calm and effective."

"Mata," Ted grinned, "I know why you don't understand. Maybe I can help, some. Parents are funny creatures. They grow up going through all this stuff and then, when they become parents themselves and are faced with a teenager, forget that they had. So there are things that parents don't tell kids about it. Maybe it's because they're ashamed of it, themselves, maybe it's because they think, 'oh, my poor little Johnnie or Sarah would never do anything like that'. It's a tendency in some parents to not believe that their child will grow up. As a result, a lot of information that teenagers learn is from each other or from older sisters or brothers or possibly older friends. I think Muriel just got herself an older sister. In fact, from the way you describe it, I wonder if Sally dumped her experiences and knowledge onto Muriel and let it open up, and that's what all the giggling and blushing was about. Sounds like it. And that way it would become a part of Muriel. Give her answers to a lot of questions she didn't know how to ask, and provide her with the basis for new questions. I hope Sally stays

in contact with her.”

“I’ll try to get either Muriel or maybe Sally to let me in on the secret,” Mata said. “I think it’s one that shouldn’t be a secret anymore. Kids can give each other bad information. Not intentionally, though that happens, too. But because they didn’t understand something correctly, or were guessing. Sally might be more inclined to talk to me about it than Muriel. She’s still going through it, after all. Hmm. I’ll have to think about this. Even if it’s just the Envoys that have the information, it would fill in some of the blanks on the human condition. We ought to get a boy to tell us his side of it, too.”

“Boys are more embarrassed about talking about it than girls are. The information you get from them might be dead wrong,” Ted said. “But you’re right, this bears thinking about. Even human literature usually sloughs over this topic, implying that the person just naturally knows the stuff by magic, which is absurd. However . . . there might be a way. Kids in their mid to late teens that died in traffic accidents or other causes. They might be willing to talk. I’ll get the people in Home to work on it. Now that we can identify the problem, maybe we can come up with a solution.”

“Excuse me”

“Oh, hi, Sally,” Ted said, “what can we do for you.”

“I was wondering where Muriel was,” said Sally.

“Oh, I’m sorry. She’s visiting her parents right now. They went out to lunch together.”

“Oh OK.

“You know, we can help with things, too,” Mata said. “There’s also her friends and a whole lot of Envoys. Even if it’s nothing more than having company, we’re all available. Except Ted. I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him. He’s just a curmudgeon at heart and hates everyone.” Then she grinned.

“Well, I wanted to ask about Peter. Mom and dad finally came around to realizing that the training wasn’t a bad thing, and that it had some real benefits. Now, they’re talking about him taking it, if he can pass the first test,” Sally blurted out, all in one breath.

Mata and Ted started laughing. “Oh, Sally, I’m sorry,” Mata managed to sputter out. “It’s just that we were just talking about the possibility, and here it comes and bites us. Yes, if he can be trained we can supply it, no problem there.” She was still chuckling, so Ted took over.

“The problem we have is his age and level of maturity, Ted said. “Muriel is the youngest that has been trained, and the upheaval that THAT caused was pretty bad. In fact, part of it YOU solved, and I don’t know how and maybe shouldn’t. Why don’t you come in to the office with us, and we can see if we can find a way to solve the problem. It’s got to wait until he’s back up to strength, anyway. Otherwise I’d have Mark jumping all over me and

threatening to kill me again.” And he grinned.

“Again?” Sally asked, confused.

“Oh, yea. You weren't told about that,” Ted said. “I'm human. Technically. The problem is that I got Home by being shot in the head and dying. So I hit Home as a very disgruntled, angered soul that wasn't going to take lip from anyone. I made two things: a big ruckus that you don't really need to know the details of, and a new body. Then the Envoys found me and started talking to me, and I made some changes. The changes are still going on, but that's another matter. The Envoys decided that I should lead them out of the situation they had been in for centuries. Well As a result, Muriel is the first Human to make it to Home under her own power and return without dying first. And the Envoys were ecstatic and decided that she should also be a leader. So we're co-leaders. Which is nice, because we can both concentrate on our own areas and cross-talk on anything in that gray area in between. And there are things that we both work on. Mostly, here, I just back her up. Show up and look ugly . . . well uglier . . . while she does the work. On the other hand, I have a hand in passing information on how humans think, act, and behave to the Envoys here and in Home, and try to handle some of the political and business mess that resulted from some renegade Envoys that no longer exist.”

“And you're beginning to get that glazed look of someone that's just been whip-lashed by too much information,” Ted suddenly said. “Sorry. Want me to give it to you in smaller pieces?”

“Um, no. It's just . . . you never got there under your own power?” Sally asked, as they moved toward Muriel's office.

“Oh, yes. I translated back to earth and took care of some unfinished business, then back to Home, and back down again to begin setting up the visas for us to legally come into the country and buy the land for the Enclave. In fact, the treaty was the hardest part of it. So I did eventually make the round trip under my own power. But that's a good catch, but you can see why I'm only technically human.”

“Yea. That's wild,” Sally said. “And yea, I'd like to talk about how to get Peter trained, if I could. You see, I don't think he could handle Home. That's a bit of a shock. And translating would cause my parents fits. But the mental link and power and shield, yea, he needs that sometimes. Is there a way to break the training up like that?”

“Yes . . . technically it can be done. The actuality is that he might develop other skills based just off those that could be dangerous – to him or to others, depending on his emotional make-up at the time,” Mata said. “Though you've come up with the beginnings of an idea. One way to provide a check on an inventive child is to have an Envoy assigned to him until he was old enough to take the rest of the training. His parents would have to know about it, though. We don't want any pooka incidents of them thinking he has an imaginary friend.”

They spent about an hour talking before they finally came up with a plan they thought

might work, simply because they tried to answer all the questions that such a plan might raise. Then Muriel came back, and the whole plan changed. She had a kid's point of view, only just being outside that state, herself, and showed them why it wouldn't work without a deep link. Kids were too unpredictable and inventive. And boys were worse, wanting to try things they weren't ready for based on just seeing them happen. So it was decided that they'd hold off until they could determine his level of maturity, instead of approximating it from his age. They also needed to talk to his parents before any of it came about, and assure them that they wouldn't even attempt it without his level of maturity being high enough and their approval of what would happen.

Chapter 38

Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing (Sunday afternoon)

Ted, Mata, Muriel and Sally first stopped off to see Mark, to find out how Peter was doing. "Amazingly well," Mark said. "The initial work fixed the problem, and I gave him a trickle of power to build him back up. I expect that, in another one or two days he'll be able to leave."

"OK," Ted said, "what about his maturity and judgment?"

"For a child of that age, not bad. Not perfect, of course, but then even yours isn't," Mark replied.

"We have a problem," Ted said, and outlined what the four of them had discussed.

Mark heard him out, but seemed skeptical. Peter was young, and his personality was still developing. Unlike Muriel, who was older, but whose personality was forced toward maturity by the circumstances she was in at school. A trip to Home for Peter was definitely out. Too much impact at too early an age.

They were interrupted by the arrival of an Envoy and a city police officer. Before Ted or Muriel could speak, the officer said, "Muriel White, I'm arresting you on the charge of kidnapping and keeping hostage a middle-aged couple, contributing to the delinquency of minors and an additional charge of evading school. If you come quietly I shouldn't think it would be necessary to cuff you."

::Mom, dad,:: Muriel sent, ::could you come here for a moment? I've got a little problem that I think you can help solve.::

::What's the matter, honey,:: her father sent back.

::It would appear that there are warrants out for my arrest on the charge of kidnapping and holding hostage. I haven't seen the warrant, yet, but I bet your names are on them. I would imagine as a result of your being invited to stay here,:: Muriel explained. ::It's total foolishness, and I won't be leaving. But it might settle this officer down to see that you're free to go where-ever you wish and are not being held hostage, and that you came in of your own free will and weren't kidnapped.::

She then connected to the phone and called the police commissioner. "Sir," she sent, though it came out audible to him, "this is Ambassador Muriel. I hate to disturb you like this, but do you happen to know anything about any warrants out for my arrest?"

"No." He replied. "And they would have had to come through me before being enacted."

Why?"

"Because there's an officer Jacobs, here, saying he's arresting me."

"Is there a way to get me there, now, before he tries to take you in? I would presume that you have no intention of going," the commissioner said.

"You're right there. If you would stand up and move away from your desk, and close your eyes, I can have you here in less than a second. Just let me know when you're ready."

The commissioner did as she asked, and a moment later he was standing beside her. "May I see your warrants, officer?"

"No, sir. These are to go directly back to the FBI without anyone else seeing them."

"Well," the commissioner said, "we have a problem then. Actually two of them. The first is that, without my seeing them and acting on them, they aren't valid warrants. The second is that there is no officer Jacobs on my force."

"Well actually," the friendly and familiar voice of her father said, "there's another problem with the warrants. You see, we came to Enclave voluntarily at the invitation of the Ambassadors. And they have been kind enough to provide us with a place to stay. And we can come and go as we please. We are in no way kidnapped or held against our will."

"On top of that," Ted interjected, "Enclave is designated as a private school system, and Muriel and her friends are all enrolled here. They get regular tutoring sessions that have elevated their education beyond that of their classmates. And I'd have to see just what sort of 'contributing to the delinquency of a minor' the warrants specify, but I seriously doubt that the charge applies since each child is under adult supervision, and usually more than one adult at a time. They are never left alone with only one adult in attendance, and are usually right here in the office."

"The warrants, officer, or whatever you are," said the commissioner. "NOW!"

The officer, obviously nervous now and looking for a way to escape, tried bravado. Puffing himself up, he said, "No, I really must follow the directions I've been given in this matter. The warrants were given to me by the FBI, and they're a higher authority than you." One could tell that he really had no idea of the people he was dealing with. He began to try edging away, when he came up against a wall that wasn't there.

"Oh, really!" Muriel said. "Well, you neglected to think of the authority you'd be facing, walking into an Embassy full of intelligent people who can think, and facing the Ambassadors of that Embassy. By right of the Treaty, this is Sovereign Territory." Though her voice was quiet, you could hear the capital letters slam into place. She relieved the man of the warrants and passed them to the commissioner, who looked them over, carefully.

"Oh, my!" said the commissioner. "Now these are interesting. Very interesting. And

you said that they were delivered to you by someone from the FBI. Yes, indeed. One of the interesting points is that they supposedly were drawn up by a City court. Too bad the judge isn't named, but understandable since he never signed them. Misspellings. Oh, now this bit is good! Wrong, but good. I'm not a lawyer, but even I can tell that you don't use THAT particular piece of legal tripe for something like this. Yes, all in all, I can't think of a single City judge that would write like this, and their secretaries and legal assistants would certainly do a better job of writing a warrant. No, I'm sorry, but these warrants will not be served. This is why you are supposed to pass anything like that to me before trying to take action on them. To make sure they are proper, so there's no glitches in making an arrest."

"So," the commissioner continued, "who gave them to you? I'd really like to meet this person."

"I don't think he can tell you," Don, who had come to see what the commotion was, walked over to the ersatz officer. "The last time I saw him he was a security guard at the school. He never made rounds, just sat in his office, drunk, looking at nasty magazines. I see he's still drunk. I happened to see him there by accident. I never went that way through school again. In fact, the only ones that did were the bullies in the school. They used to hang out with him."

"Nice role model," Muriel commented. "So, who sent him?"

"Well," said Ted, "there are ways of finding out, but they aren't very pleasant for the victim. No, nothing physical – no torture. This is worse, There is a way to get into a person's mind and find out what they know. A version of the forced link. Trouble is, that it's as bad for the person forcing the link as it is for the person subjected to it. You find out more than you ever wanted to know about human beings. We really are a bundle of not very nice thoughts, actions and behaviors. Also, like any forced link, it can leave the person subjected to it with a headache. A bad one."

"You don't need to," said another voice. "We know. And if we'd known he was headed here and what for, we would have stopped him before. We've got the other end of this particular chain of stupidity. We'd been trying to tie down what they were up to. No major conspiracy, just jerks out to make a buck by grabbing someone and holding them for ransom." Tex walked up, in his gray uniform, and looked over the 'officer'. "This particular bottom feeder was low man on the totem pole. Expendable. That's why he was sent to try to get Muriel. They figured that she was an easily intimidated mark that would just buckle to authority, based on what they saw at the school. They also figured that, if something went wrong, that he'd be no great loss. They had no idea what she could really do, or what resources she had available. I can take him off your hands, if you like."

"You mean to say that there's nothing behind it?" asked Muriel's father.

"Yep. I could even quote Shakespeare on this one: 'it is a tale. Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.' Just a bunch of low-life's out to make a buck. No FBI contact. The warrants are likely poor forgeries. When I heard the mental traffic, I thought I'd better drop by and see if you needed any assistance" Tex drawled. "Not sure you need any,

though. You seem to have called out the Marines.”

“No, we just naturally go where there's trouble. Hi, Tex. Hi, Muriel,” said Melanie. “Whew! Don, you were right. He's drunk. Did he drive here? You'd at least have that charge to take him in on. Just station one of your people by his car in the parking lot. He moves it ten feet, and is arrested for D.U.I.”

“Now, lady, that's an interesting suggestion,” Tex said, “And I'm a-gonna do just that! Easier than trying to trump up this charge. 'Course, it doesn't negate this charge, but it gets him under our thumb and the evidence available to hang the rest on. Ought to put this critter out of business for a while, and allow him to sober up.”

Meanwhile Jacobs, or whatever his name actually was, was looking back and forth between them, shaking his head and muttering increasingly louder, “No,” over and over again. “Please, No, they'd kill me. You wouldn't do that to me, would you? Please! You take me in and they'll get me. They've got contacts in the police. They'll know.”

“Who are the contacts?” the commissioner demanded.

“I don't know. I just know they're there. They keep getting information from inside. That's where they got the forms for the warrants, and how to write them up. I know they're in the city. I think they are in the State Police, too,” Jacobs stuttered out.

Ted interrupted, “I think there are a couple of ways we can play this. We could take him Home, but you know what that would entail. Or, we could rig a small house so he can't get out. An Envoy could bring him food and such, see to his actual needs without letting him out of confinement. The trouble is that we would need to be authorized to hold an American citizen that way.”

“I may be able to help with that. Give me a second or two. Kidnapping, or attempted kidnapping, is a Federal offense,” Melanie said. She went quiet and unfocused for a minute, then came back into focus and said, “OK, my boss is going to check on the possibility of your holding him at our request until the possible department leaks can be found and plugged. Let's go sit down somewhere and have coffee or whatever until I get the information back from my Detail.”

Ted sent ahead to a particular restaurant that specialized in quick ins and outs, and tables were set up to handle the entire group when they translated in. The adults chose coffee. Muriel and Don had pop – just as much caffeine but without the stigma of having an 'adult' drink. And they chuckled over that.

At one point Melanie asked, “How long would it take to set up such confinement?”

“Moments,” replied Ted. “It's a simple application of shielding. Windows, doors, any place that a man could get through would be blocked. Then another shield would be set around the entire building. Either of them would stop him. Oh, and there would be an Envoy on premises constantly, being sure that he was still safely tucked in. These would be two way

shields. Nothing gets in or out.”

It was a half hour before they had any indication of the answer. One of Melanie's Detail escorted a man in a darker suit into the restaurant and over to their tables.

“My name is Henry Richards, Special Agent of the FBI,” he said, producing his identification. “I'd like to see the evidence, if I may.” The documents were passed to the agent, and Ted started introducing the people around the table, but the agent waved him off. “I know who you are, all except for the young man by Ambassador Muriel and that scruffy looking officer between Sergeant Morris and Sergeant Carter. May I sit?”

“Of course,” said Ted, and a chair was produced for the agent. “Something to drink?”

“Coffee would be fine,” Agent Richards responded. “I just want to make a couple of notes. And is there a chance that copies of these could be made? My boss might want to enjoy some of the things in them.” He pulled out a pad and pen, and began jotting things down. This continued for some minutes and by the time he was done copies of the documents arrived as well as a disc with a recording of the initial events with 'Jacobs'. A laptop was produced for him to see what was on the disc, and he laughed several times during the playback.

“This is priceless,” he said. “If I hadn't seen your recording and the documents, I never would have believed it. The most inept attempt at a kidnapping I've ever heard of. Requiring not only the submission of the victim but her active cooperation. I can't believe they expected it to work. Now, is there any chance I can see where you would be holding him?”

“Sure,” Ted said, “of course. We need to wait a few minutes, though. It's still being finished. When I suggested what I wanted to my Security Chief, he opted to build a structure rather than use an existing one. That way the shields are built right into the structure. It should be soon. You'll have time to finish your coffee in peace.”

“Good. Good coffee shouldn't be rushed. Where do you get it?”

“We make it,” Ted replied. “This comes from Home. You might say it's Homely”

“Ted,” Muriel groaned, “you've been working with Bart again, haven't you. That one was pitiful. You COULD have restrained yourself.”

“But that's no fun. Besides, I got the reaction I expected,” he said. “You groaned.”

“Any chance I can buy some?” the agent asked, cutting the banter short.

“Sure. But why don't we just give you a couple of pounds to try out on your people to see if they like it. Some people find it too rich,” Ted replied. “Let us know their reaction and maybe we can temper some of it for them.”

“You'd do that?”

"No reason why not. Of course, you'd have to clear it through customs to allow the import. Like I said, it comes in from Home," Ted replied.

"I've seen the Treaty. No restrictions. If there're any problems, I'll solve them." Agent Richards said, firmly. "Besides, customs has been trying to enforce things they aren't supposed to enforce, lately. I think they're empire-building. I'd be more than happy to help them learn their limits." And he smiled, grimly. "Can I ask a question? How did I get here?"

"Oh, that. It's no real secret," said Muriel. "We just go from point A to point B without bothering with what's in between. Like stepping into a picture or image that's real. Or, for the more advanced, just making the picture or image be where you are. Simple."

"Yea, right," Richards said. "Simple. If it were simple then everyone could do it."

"Well, with a qualification," Muriel said, "anybody can. After all, right here at the table are six people that can do it, and Melanie's got fifteen more. I don't know how many Tex has by now, though I heard he was training some. And I've got eleven other friends that are all my age and trained."

"So, what's the catch"

"You have to be able to make a mental link," Muriel said. "Now you know our secret shame. We're all mental, here." And Ted groaned.

"I heard something about that," said Richards. "Is it hard?"

"Depends on the person," Muriel replied. "With most people, it either works or it doesn't. I've had one person I had to coax through it. But I knew he could, because I could see him trying to reach me. After that, he went through the rest of the training without any real trouble. That's this monster sitting next to me, Don."

"Aw, Muriel," Don said, "I didn't know you cared. Seriously, Agent Richards, if she can get someone through the training, they'll be trained. And she will seriously try. She did with me, playing with different ways of doing it – knock on the door, whisper in her ear, build an image of her – all sorts of ways. If it can be done, she'll do it. The Envoys are the same way."

"Don't let him kid you, Agent," Muriel said. "Don is the first of the kids to become a trainer. And his first trainee was willing to try, but had a major problem. One that could have gotten them both killed. And he talked his trainee through it and got the problem solved. He dealt with a problem that no one had ever seen before, much less suspected, and with only his basic training. He's as good or better than I am."

"So, you have shields up all the time?" Richards asked.

"Shield," said Muriel. "And yes. Plus it can be anchored so that even if someone could get ahold of it, it wouldn't do any good. And to add to that, it can be created in any shape I

can imagine, and charged with enough power to run the city for a month. Nope, trying to kidnap me would be useless. And anyone that saw the news report of what happened on my last day in the city's school system would know that. In addition, I can holler for help and they'd never know, or I can just translate away from them, like Fran did when she was snatched in Home. Nope, kidnapping just doesn't make any sense."

"Well, the confinement is finished. Melanie, would you do the honors with our friend from the FBI, please?" Ted asked. "Tex can take our fake officer, leaving Muriel, Don and I to loaf along on our own."

"I think, if you don't mind," Muriel's father said, "Lily and I would like to tag along."

Chapter 39

A House is Not A Home (Sunday late afternoon)

They all came out on a quiet residential street, in front of a house that looked much like many of the houses around it. Housing tract kitsch had come to Enclave. The group walked up to the house, and Agent Richards tried doors and windows, going around the structure looking for a way in.

As they returned to the front Agent Richards said, "So, how do you get him in?"

"Oh, like this," Melanie said, and translated inside with him. "See? Simple. But it takes the training, and Jacobs doesn't have it. Likewise, he can't get out. Try the doors and windows." Which he did, starting with the living space – kitchen, great room, etc. - then proceeding to the bedrooms.

When they went back outside to the others, Richards remarked, "It's approved. This place is more secure than the most secure prison in the country." Jacobs with two Envoys translated into the house. "Sergeant, could I prevail on you to give me a lift back to the office?" Richards asked Melanie.

"Well, I don't know, Agent Richards. It depends on what I find out in the next few minutes. First of all, why do you keep referring to me as Sergeant?"

"Isn't that what it works out as?" asked Richards.

"Actually," Melanie said, "the detail I'm part of doesn't have anyone below the rank of Captain. And since I'm the Detail Chief, well I think you can work out the rest. I think what's happened here is a case of thinking that because I'm a woman I must be of a lower rank. As a matter of fact I had the previous Detail Chief arrested on various charges. No need to go into all that. However, with the slot opened up, the entire detail felt that I should be the one to take the position, and our boss accepted their verdict."

"Oops. You're right. I should have asked. And I put my foot in it by adding arrogance to the mix. Will you forgive me?"

"I'll think about it on the way back to your office," Melanie grinned. Since it was just a short step for her, it would be a short think. She's gotten the visual from her Detail member before he'd left the restaurant, so all she had to do was see about picking up the coffee from Ted. She gave the coffee to Richards, but made sure that SHE had the copies of the warrants and the disc containing the video of the events, then translated directly to Richards' boss' office.

"Well, Richards," his boss said, looking up.

“Definite case of fraud, forgery of court documents, as well as an attempt at kidnapping and assorted other charges. I've seen the warrants – Melanie has copies of them – as well as a recording of the events. Humorous, to say the least,” Richards replied.

“Very good. And he's secure?”

“Very. There isn't any place in the country more secure, and guarded continuously by at least two Envoys.”

“OK. Well, young lady, hand over the copies and recording, then you can leave. You aren't cleared for any of what's going to happen next,” Richards' boss said.

“I don't think so. First, until told otherwise, the USSS is still in charge as the senior agency. And if you want to dispute it we can go talk to your commander. Which brings up point number two,” and Melanie pulled her ID out of a 'no pocket' and held it up with her stripes showing. “I outrank him, too. My name is Melanie Carter, and I'm the President's Detail Chief. Do you have any further defamatory comments to make?”

“Boss,” Richards said, “you're usually faster on the uptake. She brought me back by translating directly from Enclave to your office. That should have told you that she had the training. And the only people in USSS that have the training so far are President's Detail. You made the same mistake that I did. You should have asked.”

“Harrumph, OK, Ms. Carter, what do you want to know?”

“Why you're so interested in an unsuccessful kidnapping attempt that was so badly bungled that it resulted in the kidnappee effectively arresting the kidnapper. A twelve year old girl, I might add. Also, the one that trained me. Just what is it that you want?”

“Need to know, Ms.”

“Very good,” said Melanie, in a voice that would have frozen Methane. “And since I have the need to know, you will oblige me. Trust me, I've seen a government office locked down by Envoys and the Deputy Director arrested. In fact, I did the arresting. I smell hanky-panky, and the possibility of it slopping back over my charge. That gives me the need to know. So, let's go see your commander and see what he thinks about it.”

Richards' boss sighed. “Look, he doesn't know about this. At least not yet, and we'd prefer that he not know until the time comes. We don't care about the kidnapping attempt. The city or state can deal with it. The reason I sent Richards instead of just blowing it off was because it was requested by someone that obviously had the training. I thought you'd caught a ride with him, and he'd popped back out again. We've heard about your training, and wanted to know what it could do, and whether it would be right for our organization. When we know enough, we'll approach the old man and present our case. But we have to know, first.”

“Richards,” Melanie said, “hand the kind gentleman those packages, then I think you

and he need a break. So let's go where the coffee is as good and the security is better, and the privacy exceptional."

"What's this?" asked Richards' boss.

"Coffee. The best on the planet. And less than the crap we've been paying for. A buck a pound. These two were free. And I won't make the obvious comparison to the drug world and their marketing techniques. These are free simply because the man that offered them to me doesn't want us disappointed in the product of his nation. That man, by the way, was Ambassador Ted. Yes, I met him, along with the twelve year old object of the kidnapping attempt, Ambassador Muriel. They treated me to a cup of coffee while their confinement was being built. I thought I'd died and gone to a reward I hadn't earned. It's made in Home," Richards said. "And what Ms. Carter is suggesting is that we take the discussion to the place where I had it. Enclave."

"Well, we both do have tomorrow off. But I should get a change of clothes. So should you, Richards," said his boss.

"Bother that, you'll both be listed as guests, and we can go shopping for you there. Don't sweat it. Now hold on a minute," Melanie said.

::Muriel, incoming. I'm bringing Richards and his boss back with me. I found out why they were pumping us. Coffee for three, like we had at the restaurant and where do you want me to place them?::

::Start at the street,:: Muriel sent back. ::Give them the full effect of my office. I'll have Ted sit in, too. Bring them into the casual area. I'll leave my desk after you're there.::

::OK. Also, guest status for two, and we need to hit the shops for clothes for them for tomorrow,:: Melanie added.

::No sweat,:: Muriel sent back. ::I'll have the shop keeper pop in and measure them and see what they need. Right down to shoes and underwear. Won't fit as good as what they'll make, but will be better than what they're wearing.::

"OK," Melanie said to the two. "Come on over here and I'll take you. Everything's set up." So, Richard's boss came around the desk, and Melanie translated the three of them to the street outside Muriel's office. "I know, this isn't the restaurant. It's Muriel's office. Probably the most secure place in all of Enclave. You wouldn't think so, but you see all those people in back? Over half of them are three squads of her Security Detail. And they take their jobs very seriously. The rest are her friends, and they're even more protective. Hi, Mata," Melanie said as they went through the 'whoosh' doors. "Now this way, and just sit down. She'll be with us in a minute."

As they found seats in the casual area, an Envoy entered with a tray and coffee service, complete with cream, sugar and Drambuie for a truly royal coffee. The pot was large enough to hold twelve cups. The cups were mug sized – larger than standard cups – and

were embossed with the Home logo. As he left, another Envoy entered and asked the two men to stand up. Looked them over, and tsked a bit, then left. Ted, complete with his casual area chair, translated in across from them, and Muriel joined them, making it obvious that she was only a young girl.

"Ted, Muriel," Melanie said, "You know Henry Richards. The other man is his boss. I'm sorry," she said to him, "I never did catch your name."

"Adam Frank," Richards' boss said. "I've heard it said that I was put in charge of these yayhoos because I was first." You could almost see the >CRICKETS < signs go up.

Finally, with a straight face, Muriel said, "Well, that's Frank of you."

As Ted covered his face with his hand, Richards said, "Sorry, boss. I should have warned you. They're like this even when they're serious."

"So," Muriel continued, "what can we do for you?"

"We were wondering about the training that Melanie has," said Adam.

"Why, Melanie, you could have told them," Muriel said.

"I know, but I think they're more interested in the training YOU had."

Muriel laughed. "Melanie," she said, "It's the same as what you had. Honest."

"Is it effective?" Adam asked.

"Yes. Definitely. Otherwise I'd be dead at least twice over," said Muriel.

"How long does it take?"

"Providing you can pass the first test, two to four days. Maybe less."

"What do you provide with the course?"

"Well," Muriel drew it out, "training, of course, and food and lodging. Oh, and you'll make your own clothes before you're done. Never have to buy them again. What else?"

"Anything in Enclave, free," Ted continued for Muriel. "The right to call on us in emergencies. We reserve the right to do the same with you, of course. And passports something like Melanie's." Melanie dutifully handed over the green booklet with the Home logo on it, and Henry's and Adam's eyes bugged out.

"OK, I know I'm going to regret watching a dream get flushed down the toilet, but what's the cost?" Adam asked.

Ted said, "We don't charge for the training. That's because you'll pay for it with your lives, with what you do with it and how you pass it on. You'll find that, once you've been trained, you can't turn down an emergency for anything less than the emergency you're already facing. And you will face them, on and off duty."

"You'll also learn how to holler for help when you need it, in a way that others won't be able to hear. And how to keep a shield around you all the time. And how to go from point A to point B without bothering to pass through all the points in between," Melanie added.

"And, you'll learn what it is to face the ultimate judgment," Muriel said. "That's the roughest part of the training. Not the hardest to learn, but the hardest to accept."

"But," Ted added, "If Muriel and her twelve friends can do it, anyone can. They did it at twelve years of age, after all."

Muriel turned to Ted and said, "Why don't you take Henry and Don to your office and find out if they can take the training." Muriel turned back to Adam, and put him through the 'knock on the door' routine. A slow grin crossed her face as his eyes bugged out and his jaw dropped open.

"Did I look that ridiculous when I did it?" asked Melanie.

"Well, you were prettier," Muriel replied.

"Thanks, I think."

"Th . . . that's it?" Adam asked.

"No, that's just where it starts. But without that link you wouldn't be able to learn the rest," Muriel said. "Oh, and it serves to keep out the bad guys. Too many secrets that they're afraid someone might find out. So they can't make the link."

Ted, Don and Henry returned to their places, Don with a smug look on his face. "I take it you did it again?" Muriel asked Don. He just pointed to Ted.

"Don was kind enough to talk me through it and monitor," Ted said.

"Yea, Muriel. I can teach anybody. Even Ted." The smug look turned into a grin. "Of course, I had to hold him down and beat on him a while before he'd let me show him how to do it." Ted just snorted.

"Youth," Ted said. "Never thinks that the old were once young."

"In your case," said Don, "it's probably because you never were." And grinned again.

"Children!" Muriel said, "behave yourselves. We have work to do and guests to take care of."

"Yes, mother," Ted and Don chorused. "So, what's next?" asked Ted.

Muriel counted off on her fingers: "Room, dinner, clothing, then rest for them. We DON'T do any of the rest until tomorrow morning. As they are now they are relatively safe. It's that period from this point to where they get their first stripe that's dangerous. So let's stop before we start and do all that in one go. We can have them back home to smog and bickering by Tuesday afternoon. Maybe even Tuesday morning, depending on the shape they're in."

"Dangerous?" Adam asked.

Muriel replied, "There is a point where you learn to draw power. And you need it for the next phase, which is to build your personal shield. From the time you access power to the time you have a good, solid shield you would be vulnerable. We try to make that period as short as possible, so you don't look tasty to anything hungry for long enough to locate. And during that period you're covered by the shields of your trainer, thus protected."

"We really didn't know HOW important that was until recently, when Don took on his first trainee and discovered that such a hungry what's-it had taken up residence in the guy and needed to be evicted," she continued. "Don literally took over and ordered us around, taught the guy enough to do the job cold, while endangering himself in the process. He's a GOOD teacher. His trainee did everything right the first time, which is good because there wouldn't have been a second time. Why do you think I included him in the training session. He may be better than me . . . than I Oh, well, I'm not expected to know proper grammar. I'm only twelve."

"In any case," Muriel went on, "your room is covered. Just check in at the desk and they'll have someone take you up. And by 'check in' I mean just tell them your names. Registration has already been taken care of. And you each now have a suitcase with the Home logo on it, and your name underneath. In it is a complete change of clothes, including shoes. There's room in there for the set that you're wearing, because after tomorrow you shouldn't need them. Dinner is on us, at one of Enclave's upscale restaurants. And again, as trainees, it doesn't cost you anything. Besides, would YOU want to tell the head of Enclave and Home that they haven't paid the bill?" She grinned. "So, let's go eat and get you to your rooms. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

Chapter 40

Cleanup Detail (Monday)

Monday morning went about as expected. Ted and Don gathered the two FBI men in as soon as they were up and breakfasted, took them to Ted's apartment and got them powered up and into shields with a careful casualness that belied the protections on their charges and the care they took in explaining how to do things. Muriel, on the other hand, felt that she was 'putting out brush fires', dealing with the details of yesterday that they had let slide.

Her first call had gone out to Sally, to find out how her brother was and apologize for not getting to him sooner. That was when she discovered that that particular brush fire was already put out. Muriel's parents had gone with Sally to see Peter and talk with their parents. The talk had apparently lasted about an hour, away from Peter, and the result was that Peter wouldn't be trained right away. It had also resulted in Sally's parents becoming more comfortable with the fact that Sally was trained. All it really meant was that she could protect herself and, when she was with him, could protect her brother. It also meant that she was eligible for schooling with the other kids in Enclave, and Muriel's parents explained what that meant and how advanced the schooling was. So Sally's parents were mollified. Muriel simply had to show up and put the cap on it, so to speak.

Muriel first went to her parents and thanked them for taking on that task. "Oh, honey, we knew you were busy. And it was something that was possibly better done by parents to parents, anyway. We were glad to do it. And those two kids are really great, though no doubt a bit of a handful. Any time we can help like that, we'd be happy to," her mother said.

Her father added, "Besides, we're rightfully proud of what you do with your training and how you can take care of yourself. And this helps us feel that we're paying back all the benefits we've gotten from being your parents."

The next item on her agenda was to check in with Tex to find out what he wanted done with Jacobs. Tex asked her to hold him a while longer. An operation was being put in place to roll up the entire gang in one go, at which point it would be safe to bring Jacobs in and formally charge him. Muriel had no problem with that, and Tex promised to keep her informed as to the status of the operation.

Melanie had gone back to Washington for Detail shift changes and to oversee an important meeting the President had, and was expected back shortly. And, in fact, she arrived just in time for Ted, Don, and the two FBI men to conclude level three by translating to Muriel's office under their own power. So, she got to see the two get three stripes, apiece, and learn how to make them visible to those without training. She congratulated them on their progress, and admired their new suits which fit much better than the original ones had.

"Now," Melanie said, "you couldn't have had time to actually go through a lot of your clothes and uniforms. I DO hope they told you about 'no pockets'." At the nods of the two men, she went on, "OK, you need to take some time going over all the possible things you might wear. On duty, of course, but also formal and casual wear. And if you were in the service, even your old uniforms just for practice. In addition, I don't know what they told you about armament, since they don't use any, themselves. But," and she pulled her service pistol out of her 'no pocket'. "You aren't limited to that, though. My backup piece used to be a compact on my ankle. Awkward and always in the way, and not much stopping power. So, this is my backup, now," and her left hand held a military .45 caliber pistol.

"In addition," Melanie went on, "ANY weapon you can remember well enough can be used as the template. For example," and she switched from her suit to Marine Corps field uniform and helmet, and an assault rifle. "I know. These are being phased out, but it's the weapon I know. So I can create it on the spot. Oh, and for shaving," which got a chuckle out of the men until she switched to blues with a sword at salute. "So, you've got some thinking to do, and maybe some research, too. Get familiar with what you might need under what circumstances, so you can create it on the spot."

"However," she added, switching back to her suit, "don't think that you HAVE to use firepower to end a conflict. If Muriel hasn't shown you the recording of a day at school, have her show you. Purely defensive, yet it was an all out assault. And she looked like it was just a normal day at school for her. Oh, and she wasn't completely trained at that point. Muriel's got a passel of crazies that would be more than happy to help you figure stuff out, both Envoy and Human. And I've got fifteen guys that are the same way, if you feel easier talking to adult males. They've all got the training, and some of them may end up becoming trainers, themselves. Just please pick someone that's off duty at the time," she said, and grinned.

"Geez!" said Adam. "SS and FBI working together? The sky will fall in!"

"Yea," said Melanie, "But we gotta help the Fee Bees out sometimes. Younger brothers, and all that." And they both laughed.

"Well, I think from now on we'll see if we can keep you further in the loop," Adam said.

"Yea, that could have turned into a full-blown incident," Melanie replied.

"You've still got one more test to pass, then we can all relax," Ted said. "Do you want to take a break before we start you on that?"

"How long does it take?" Henry asked.

"Oh, not long, but the strain can be a bit tough. It hit's everybody differently, though. Muriel's friends had no problem at all. Melanie swore she'd never do it again, then did so voluntarily. Some of her detail was out of commission for a day, but part of that might have been the battlefield first aid course they got afterward. Really, it all depends on the individual."

"Then let's get it done and over with," Adam said. "Then we can break to good reason."

"I need someone to mentor them," Don said. "I've never done it, really. Tex had someone else with him. Oh, I went, but I didn't understand what a mentor did."

"Then it's a good thing that I showed up," Bart said, coming into Muriel's office. "I'll be glad to have you link in with me to see how it's done, and why. Really, it's as easy as the other."

"I've never done it, either," Said Melanie.

"Nor have I," said the now familiar drawl of Tex. "And here I miss all the fun. Ah, well, some of us have to work."

"Bart, what do you think?" asked Mata. "You take two and I take one? Or the other way around."

"Two's as easy as one. At least for me. They're just observers. I'll take Don and Tex, and you can have Melanie."

"You people are being awfully mysterious. What's up?" asked Henry.

"Oh, nothing special. You're just going to make yourselves Citizens of Home. By going there and coming back under your own power. And from only a visualization and the knowledge of the twist that will take you there," Bart said. "Actually, it's no more difficult than any other translation. But you have to know the twist to make it work right. Which means you have to be able to follow directions. It also means that you have to be willing to ask questions and verify things before you make the trip, or it can go bad. Bad as in not work and need to be rescued, not bad dangerous."

"And we only send one trainee at a time," Mata added. "So you, Mr. Special Agent Henry Richards, will have to wait a few minutes while your boss makes the trip."

"That's reasonable," Henry said. "I've spent half my career waiting for him." And grinned.

"One other thing," Bart said. "Failure is not an option. Yes, we'll rescue you if something goes wrong. But you'll just have to take the test again until you get it right. Save me some time. I'm an old man." This brought snickers from Muriel and Ted, and a scowl for their snickers from Bart.

And it went off without a hitch. Each had met someone that he'd known before, and had died. Adam came back pale and shaking, but under his own power. Henry, on the other hand, seemed to have more energy than when he left. Also, more determination. But both checked out as being balanced – and double-checked by the Envoys, so each received their stripe for the trip, their braid stripe for balance, and their passport. Adam had to be different.

He wanted gold for the braid. Ted saw no reason why not and obliged him. Henry opted for onyx, suggesting that any FBI team so trained should also have onyx. Like Melanie's crew, it showed solidarity. Tex, Don and Melanie came back from their respective tag-along trips grinning. The Envoys had put them to work actually BEING the monitors and expecting them to act if something happened, and said that they did well. They wanted to talk further with the three, but saw no reason why they couldn't be mentors at any time. Nothing serious, they assured Ted. Just little hints and tricks that could help them in that function. So the Envoys and three humans grouped around Mata's desk and held a mental discussion.

Adam took his passport out of his 'no pocket' and looked at it. "I can't believe it. I have to, of course, but it's difficult. All this time I'd been raised to fear some all-powerful being that would judge me when I died. Then to find out the truth. That we judge ourselves more harshly than any such being could do, and we do it in life as well as after" His voice just kind of petered out. Then he straightened up and looked at Ted and Muriel. "And you both have gone through something like this. And the kids! Unreal. Yea, I see what the actual test is. If that judgment doesn't break you then you passed and are balanced." He looked down at the gold braid on his sleeve. "And this is a constant reminder of what you went through. Of course Envoys wouldn't want the stripes. They are the stripes. It's built into them. And I made it." He straightened up, began looking more confident. "Boy, this is going to make a difference in my behavior."

Finally, he looked up at Ted and Muriel, who hadn't said a word. "NOW I see why you people banter and goof. It pulls off the tension and allows you to say things to each other without being hurtful. I think I'm going to have to think about that one. I respected you two before simply because you were Ambassadors. Now, knowing what you know and what you've gone through, I think I can see what you're trying to do. I'm behind it one hundred percent."

"That's quite a speech," Ted said, quietly. "I hope you'll forgive our listening in. It's the first time that we've actually seen the thought process of someone so deeply affected. And it's commendable the way you handled it. Congratulations. And can we pass that little speech to the Envoys? They are the other side of the equation. They're trying to become more human."

"Yes, of course," Adam said. "There isn't anything really personal in it, other than my feelings and realizations," Adam said. And if it helps them, then by all means do it. Though I can't see why people as perfect as they are would WANT to become human. Messy. All those emotions and biological stuff sloshing around inside and affecting how you think."

"Well, that's the point. They can't judge," Ted said. "Not really. They can protect, but their outlook is somewhat artificial because they can't judge. They can do what they're told, of course, and follow rules that someone like us hands down. They also aren't creative, as a whole. There are exceptions to that, in limited ways. Our security squads, being exposed to us, are getting better at both. But it's still a problem for them. And they don't kill. They leave that to us, because that's higher level judgment."

"Where are they," Mark broke in. "I know you're hiding them. Show yourselves!"

"Hi to you, too, Mark," said Muriel. "And we're not hiding anybody. They're right there. Have at."

Mark grinned and turned around. "Hi, I'm Mark and I'm an Envoy. I'm what passes for a doctor here in Enclave. You two just got back from your round-trip home, I take it? Well, I have a little package for you that can help in the field and in emergencies. I'm just going to dump it on you, and it'll open up itself over the next day or two. It'll give you techniques to save lives in the field. Right up to the point of actually healing people of life-threatening wounds, etc. So, if I can have a link with you, I'll get it done and be on my way. Oh, don't try to access it for at least a day. It won't hurt you. You just won't be able to access it until it's completely open." He looked at each of them for a moment, then said, "OK, that's done. Good luck." And disappeared.

"And that," said Muriel, "was Mark, with his battlefield first aid course. When it has opened up completely you will have the equivalent of a paramedic plus degree and hands on experience. How he manages to pack all that in there, I have no idea. But it's already saved lives. And anyone that makes it Home and back gets it. Useful in all sorts of emergency situations. That's also the same way that my friends and I get our education. We're already three years ahead of our nominal grade – maybe more – and only get a new dump about once a month, now. And the information is more complete and stays with you."

Melanie, Tex and Don came back into the office and collapsed onto the couch, laughing. "Oh, that man," Melanie said. "Absolutely insane. But now we have a better idea of what a monitor does on those trips, as well as all through the training process. We'll be better trainers because of it."

"I'd better be going," said Tex. "I can take Jacobs with me. I just got word from my crew that they've picked up the rest of the gang and got them booked. We'll just have to let people know not to put him in with the others. Things could get nasty. So . . . thanks for all your help, and for the chance to see what a monitor does. See ya." and he disappeared.

"Yea, I'd better be getting back, too," Melanie said. "Oh, I miss being here. But I have a job to do, and one that I'm good at. I'll be back when I can, though. Count on it." And she, too, disappeared.

Don looked serious for a moment, then asked, "Can I tell the others about what I learned?"

"Yes," Ted said.

"No," Bart said.

"Maybe," Muriel said.

"Got it," Don said. "Person by person basis, and I'll check with Muriel first. OK," and he wandered back into the break-room.

"How did he get that from all the conflicting answers?" Ted asked.

"Simple," replied Muriel. "You said yes, because you want information spread. Bart said no because he's concerned that some of the kids might not be ready for it. And I said maybe because both of you are right, and I know it from experience with them. I know Don looks lazy and laid back. Kinda dumb. But that's the image he's created from dealing with the bullies. Actually, he's kinda smart. That's why I had trouble getting him to link with me. He was over-thinking it, and confusing himself. I had to back him down, some, and get him to just do it."

"So, what have we got left?" Ted asked.

"Actually, I think things may be quiet for a bit," Muriel said. "But only for a bit. I'm sure that something else will pop up. And there will be more people looking for training. It may be slow right now, but it'll pick up. Parents of kids that want to get their schooling here instead of in the city. Law enforcement that sees the benefits of the training. And the inevitable lawsuits and physical attacks. No, this is just a lull."

"So, it never ends." Ted said this as a statement and not a question. "It just keeps going on until one side or the other wins."

"That's about it," Muriel said. "We deal with the bullies as they appear, and sometimes try to get ahead of them. And each time they learn. I have to believe that we'll win, eventually, though. That's all that kept me going in school, is that hope that we'd find a way to stop the bullies. And we did, but from an unexpected source. But I'm not knocking it. We'll find new ways of advertising what we do, without advertising. We'll keep putting out fires and arresting bullies until finally they give up. Because that's what life is all about."

What Hath God Wrought Cheat Sheet

References and . . . well . . . references

(Source material for some of the odd-ball things I've put in the book)

NOTE: Characters and themes develop over time in the 'Unholy Wars of Home' trilogy. Things brought up in the first book will go through development over the course of the three books, with the end result being much more complex than originally presented. This is actually the way people come to understand things. First a simplistic idea, then filled out with more complexity as knowledge, experience and language develop. Ongoing gags, and basic themes, as well as character development, will all go through this process in the books.

Chapter 1, pg. 1 – 2: Passport – 3 1/2" X 5" See

http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_big_is_a_passport_-_the_dimensions_of_the_book

Both the US Passport and the Home passport are this size. Unlike the US, there is no color difference between the Diplomatic passport and the ordinary Citizen passport, however, other elements can be presumed to be similar in location and purpose.

Chapter 5, pg. 27: Shape of the personal shield – look at pressurized tanks, or submarines or rockets. Cylindrical. Rounded surfaces transfer strain better than flat surfaces can. It's also easier to construct. Corners and joins are weak points.

Chapter 5, pg. 29: First reference to what are called 'whoosh' doors. The idea of these doors originated with the original Star Trek television program. The reality has been incorporated into several types of stores and emergency rooms. The current operating trigger is a sensor over the door. The idea in the television program was that they were pneumatic – air operated. In reality, they were operated by stagehands pulling on ropes or cables. Current ones, in reality, are operated by electric motor, though some may have a pneumatic piston. The gag about the 'whoosh' doors claiming a victim by startling them is a reversal of the bloopers in the program, where a character would end up walking into the doors because the stagehands missed their cue. This became an ongoing gag in the books.

Chapter 5, pg. 30: First reference to the method of education. The important part is NOT that it's supplied by the mental link, but that it's more complete than what is offered in normal schools, particularly in primary and secondary schools. It's also a particular bone of contention on mine, that 'normal' schooling is memorization rather than connecting the education to reality. I saw this in both myself and in my son, that the information really didn't stick until one could relate it to reality, and in particular to elements of social structure, including politics, society at the time, music, arts, philosophy and 'current' events of the time. This is an ongoing theme in the books.

Chapter 6, pg. 33: Bullies. Bullies in schools have been a constant source of unpleasantness for many generations of children. Currently, there are efforts to reduce or eliminate the bullying that goes on in schools. But, as further books show, it's a prevalent part of society and civilization. The problem is that such individuals are sociopathic, in that they have regard only for themselves. This is a recurring theme in the books.

Chapter 6, pg. 33: The best defense – see

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_best_defense_is_a_good_offense

This axiom goes back further than modern history, and the idea of it (but not the terminology) can be found in 'The Art of War' by Sun Tsu. I reverse this axiom by showing that the best offense is an unbeatable defense, and the schoolyard bullying is where this reference starts. In a sense, this is brought out in martial arts – if they can't hit you, they can't hurt you. Just as a good offensive aggression can cause an opponent to have to react to the aggression, and therefore be a defense, so an unbeatable defense can be used as an aggression, wasting the opponent's energy and making that opponent look foolish. And for a bully, image is everything.

Chapter 6, pg. 39: Enclave. This is a developing theme, but it begins, here. The Envoy Enclave is a 'reservation', in that the laws inside Enclave are not the laws of the country surrounding it. For reference, see military reservations (bases, forts, etc.) and Native American reservations (Oh? You didn't know? When you're on them, you're subject to the laws of the tribal council). Envoy Enclave takes it one step further and designates it an Embassy (which also operates by the rules of the country it represents rather than the country that hosts it). The concept is slowly expanded over the three books of 'The Unholy Wars of Home'. The particular reference, on this page, is to the Whites naming Enclave as guardians of Muriel in the event that something happens to them. She would literally be a ward of the 'state'.

Chapter 6, pg. 40: Fainting and 'Doctor' Mark. This becomes an ongoing gag, that whenever someone faints, it's Muriel's fault, and Mark comes out to bring them out of it. It started with wanting to give a brief glimpse of Envoy style medical practices. There are several possible causes for fainting, and I don't pretend to be a doctor – not even on television. Take any medical references as a 'writer's device' rather than anything based on reality.

Chapter 7, pg. 42: First reference to human sexuality. The books in the first trilogy are kept to the level of information that an informed twelve year old might be subjected to and understand. In this case, Muriel can't be expected to know or understand the sexuality of her parents, but she CAN know that a physical closeness that they had and lost has been returned to them. Hence, her need to leave their proximity when they begin acting younger than their apparent years, and her embarrassment and humor.

Chapter 7, pg. 43: Envoys. References to Envoys have been in passing up to this point, and not really identified. Up to this point, simply that they can be invisible and can come when called (possibly because they're already there, just not visible), and are protectors and teachers has come out. They are bodiless and genderless, and can assume any form they need. They are also able to create things. Now begins the ongoing description of them. In this instance, they're shown to not need sleep, and that they can eat and enjoy it. The progression of the development of the nature of Envoys is deliberate. It's what Muriel comes across and experiences, so the understanding of them is hers. Each new revelation of the abilities of Envoys adds to that development in a fairly straight-forward manner, and suits the situation of the time.

Chapter 7, pg. 46: >CRICKETS< and >SCORPION<. Reference to crickets is that things are so silent that all you can hear are the crickets. Scorpions kill and eat crickets. This was an ongoing gag in an Internet Relay Chat room for a while, and I brought it in here to show that Muriel was becoming more self-confident – that she was taking charge at this point.

Chapter 7, pg 46: Benefits of employment by Enclave and Home. This is the first enumeration of the benefits. She's employed by home, so she gets food, shelter, clothing (by making it), and medical attention free. She also gets a salary that's put in trust for her, and her parents are offered 'maintenance' funds over and above that. This is based on the child labor laws of the United States, but expanded a bit to keep untrustworthy trustees from bleeding off the trust fund. Guest rights, that come up later, are based on the benefits, but not the salary.

Chapter 7, pg. 47: Mata's nature. This is the first acknowledgment of Mata as an organizer and the one that covers the details that a young girl might not know to deal with. It's also the beginnings of the realization that Muriel deals in broad strokes, while Mata figures out how to actually implement the ideas, and hands them back to her, ready to use.

Chapter 8, pg 52: First reference to the number of Muriel's friends. Twelve, to be exact. Astute readers will realize that there is a parody going on, here. A leader with twelve friends – now where have you read THAT before? Yes, there is a religious – or actually an anti-religious – theme going on here. This is also where Muriel is shown to be a trainer – a teacher, if you will. This is also where Don begins his career as a 'bat boy'.

Chapter 9, pg. 56: “A Man's Reach Should Exceed His Grasp”. The full quotation of Robert Browning is, “Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?” This is the first reference that Home is actually heaven. This is actually a reversal, because, in this case, a young girl's grasp exceeds her reach – she gets to heaven – Home – under her own power and alive, and takes her friends there to show them what it is. It also shows that Envoys are Angels, and begins the theme that Angel = Envoy = Messenger, and Envoys are both the messenger and the message. And not all of them are good.

Chapter 12, pg. 80: “It isn't easy being me.” Veiled reference to the Muppet Movie - “It's not easy being green”. The statement then, as now, shows that being different can be difficult.

Chapter 13, pg. 89: “Yea, she's smart,” he said. “Or at least some part of her anatomy is.” - Smart-ass. Did I really need to explain it?

Chapter 13, pg. 89: “No plan survives the first encounter with the enemy.” Attributed to several military figures, but may actually go back as far as Sun Tsu, “The Art of War”.

Chapter 16, pg. 111: “It's just Tommy. Thomas, actually, but then everyone would think I doubted them.” Doubting Thomas.

Chapter 17, pg. 113: “To See Ourselves as Others See Us ” - "To A Louse, On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet at Church", Robert Burns. This quotation, “O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us To see oursels as ithers see us! It wad frae mony a blunder free us, An' foolish notion:

What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us, An' ev'n devotion!" is used in full in a book in the second trilogy. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_a_Louse.

Chapter 18, pg. 119: "The Fourth Estate (or fourth estate) is a societal or political force or institution whose influence is not consistently or officially recognized. "Fourth Estate" most commonly refers to the news media; especially print journalism or 'The Press'." See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Estate

Chapter 18, pg. 119, "I'm here to make you an offer you can't refuse. " "It's a nice place you've got here. It'd be a shame if something happened to it." "You're using all the clichés of a mob enforcer out of a bad movie." Ted intentionally uses the clichés to make the 'offer' seem ridiculous on the surface. I used them simply because I'm a nasty guy that likes to be outrageous.

Chapter 18, pg. 121: "She used a variation of 'god mode', larger than normal, bright, and with ridiculous wings" Foreshadowing. An Envoy would be able to appear large, bright, and with wings. She's a human. Envoys are soul. Humans are soul in a body.

Chapter 22, pg 148: "Dressing to Kill". Melanie is Secret Service, therefore has more potential to need to use a gun than ordinary citizens. Link that to "dressed to kill" by changing the point of view from past tense to present tense.

Chapter 22, pg 154: "There used to be a hill there. And a throne on top of it ." "And the souls of humans came here to be judged" This is an absolute declaration that there used to be something there that was worshiped. And that this was the place of judgment. But that the judgment was never a function of what sat on the throne.

Chapter 22, pg 155: "And we CAN go Home again." This is the reversal of the title of a book by Thomas Wolfe, "You Can't Go Home Again." See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You_Can%27t_Go_Home_Again

Chapter 25, pg 170: "Now, be polite and say 'hi' to Nancy." "Hi, Nancy." This is the old George Burns and Gracie Allen gag of "Say goodnight, Gracie." "Goodnight Gracie." that was used at the end of their television shows. Gracie Allen was a comedian who epitomized the 'dumb blond' before there WAS such a concept as a 'dumb blond'. George and Gracie played off each other well, and their timing was perfect. And in comedy, timing is everything.

Chapter 26, pg. 179: ". . . and Master Bart, who's good at baiting . . ." Master Baiter, of course.

Chapter 26, pg. 181: "But wait, there's more " Famous line from certain commercials. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Mays

Chapter 26, pg. 183: "Be like children, full of fun, teasing, and wonder. And wild and unpredictable and outrageous. And willing to learn and teach. These are the first 'Citizens of Home'." Matthew 19:14 "But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

Chapter 27, pg. 187: 'Pictures at an Exhibition'. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pictures_at_an_Exhibition

Chapter 27, pg. 189: "They will find the streets are guarded By The United States Marines" The Marine Corps Hymn. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marines%27_Hymn

Chapter 28, pg. 192: "don't call him Up-Chuck ". The Envoy, Chuck, is also the plumber.

Chapter 30, pg. 206: "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. " The Queen, from 'Through the Looking Glass', by Lewis Carroll (the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson).

Chapter 30, pg. 210: "I'm hardly a Madam, I'm only twelve ." The implication is in the double entendre of the word 'Madam". One side is the title of respect. The other is the title of a woman head of a house of pleasure.

Chapter 34, pg. 238: "Behold the girl." What made the ministers mad was that it's a parody of "Behold the man": *Ecce Homo*. John 19:5, "Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man!"

Chapter 34, pg. 238: "Oh, stop with your lying cant. Your thieves cant. Your beggars cant. " From Wikipedia: "Thieves' cant or Rogues' cant was a secret language (a cant or cryptolect) which was formerly used by thieves, beggars and hustlers of various kinds in Great Britain and to a lesser extent in other English-speaking countries."
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thieves%27_cant

Chapter 37, pg. 256: "You Can Go Home, Again ". This is a reprise of Chapter 22, pg 155: "And we CAN go Home again." This is the reversal of the title of a book by Thomas Wolfe, "You Can't Go Home Again." Well? If it was worth saying it once, it's worth saying it again.

Chapter 37, pg. 256: "These are a prime example of the species of fundamentalist religious clergy that have taken time off from fleecing their flock to come try to pull the wool over our eyes. Things could get hairy, but not for us." Alright. I'm sorry. I was just following the thread through the warp and woof of the conversation. It's a string joke.

Chapter 38, pg. 263: "Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing ". Shakespeare, Macbeth (aka 'the Scottish play), act 5, scene 5:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: **it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,**

Signifying nothing.

Tex quotes the part I marked bold on page 265. It comes to my mind that there is a group of people that rely on words – to the point where THAT is basically what they are selling you. Lawyers, politicians, clergy, businessmen, admen, and con men. Now, just looking at the contents of that group, any group that includes admen and con men is suspect in my mind, since neither of the last two have any truth in them.

Chapter 38, pg. 267: “This comes from Home. You might say it's Homely ”. For this one, I apologize. That was a BAD joke. But then, Ted's only just learning how to pull good puns out of a conversation at this point. So blame him. I had nothing to do with it.

Chapter 39, pg. 270: “A House is Not A Home ”. From a quote by Benjamin Franklin, and used as the title for a movie based on the autobiography of a madam. Hmm. We're back to madams, again. The title of the book was the same. In use in this chapter, the house is actually a prison.



Meet the Author

Craig A. Eddy

I'm 67, retired and proud of it. I live in a science fiction world. When I was 14, I wanted a computer that would do the things the room sized ones could do, but would fit in a briefcase. I was thinking small. What I ended up with a few years later was one that could do those things and fit in my shirt pocket. And it's just gotten better. I've been a CAD operator (18 1/2 years) and a number of other things in my life, and now I write fantasy novels for my own amusement using a computer with no paid software on it. All free. Even the operating system (Linux).

Currently writing Fantasy books that are available as PDF files under Creative Commons License.

Bragging rights:

I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy a B.A. in BS